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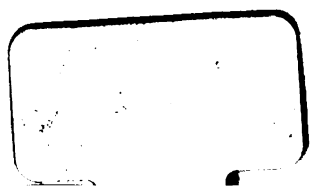
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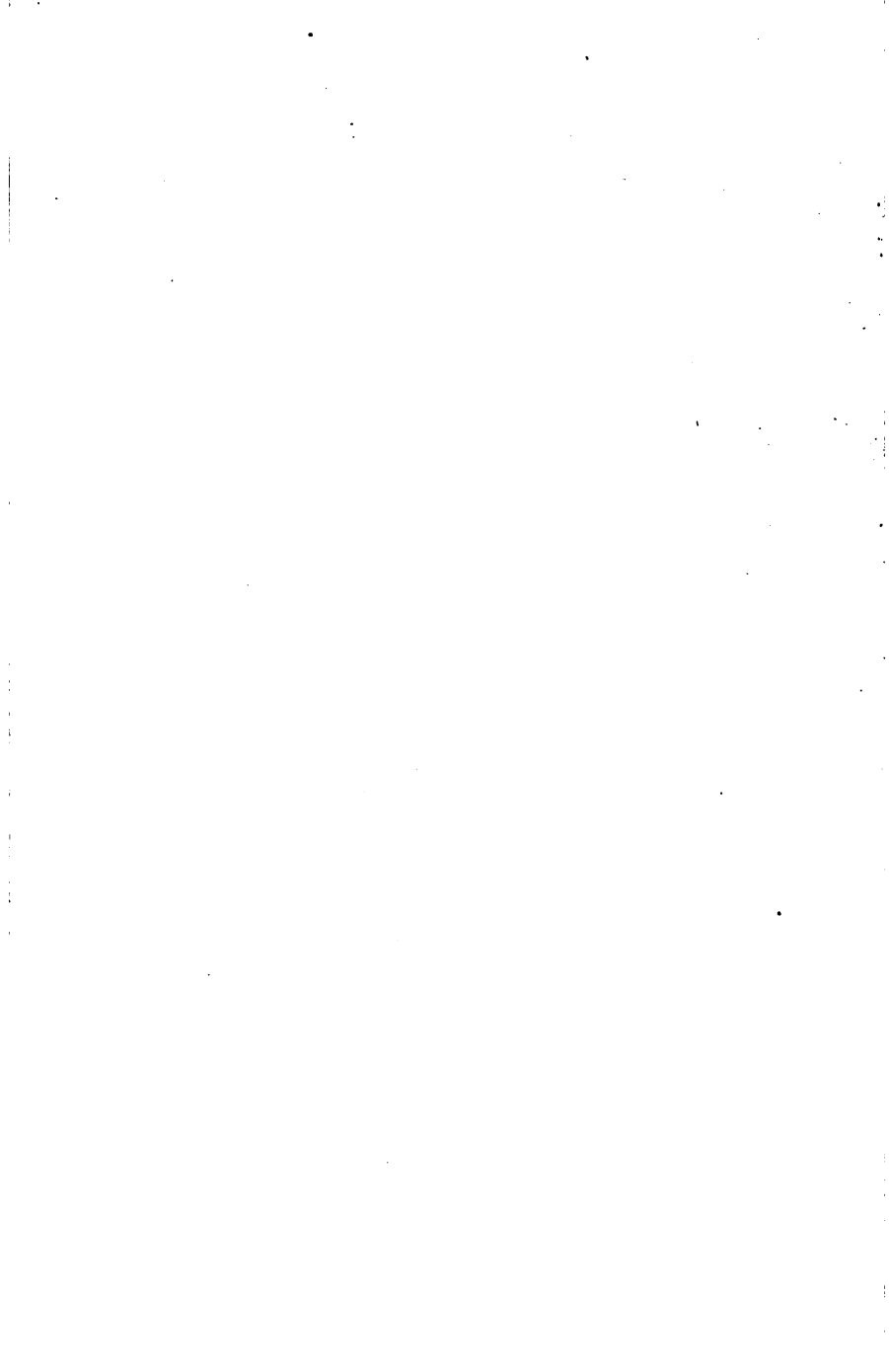
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A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY



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WITH A QUICK MOTION LADY MERCY STEPPED BETWEEN
ASHTON AND THE DOOR.—(See Page 154.)

39

A Gentleman of Quality

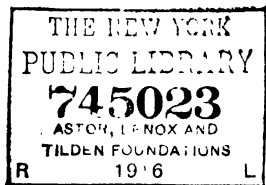
By
Frederic van Rensselaer Hey
Author of "The Magic Story"

With a frontispiece in color by
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21



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WOLFE
CLUB
VOLUME

**Electrotyped and Printed at
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DEDICATED TO
MY DAUGHTER DOROTHY AND TO
MY SON KINSLEY VAN RENSSSELEAR IN LOVING
REMEMBRANCE OF THEIR SISTER
MARJORIE



AUTHOR'S PREFACE TO THE FOURTH EDITION

IN the month of October, 1895, among the mountains of the state of Guerrero, Mexico, I met with an adventure which served two purposes, so far as I was personally concerned; it recalled a strange tale I had heard, during a former visit to that same locality (1887), and it suggested this story which I then determined, at some future time, to write. I cannot vouch for the truth of the tale told to me in '87; I can only assert that it made a deep impression upon my mind; but when the adventure referred to, occurred, a little more than seven years afterward, it was so forcibly recalled that the temptation to make it the groundwork for a story became irresistible. The consequence of it, is here.

The adventure of 1895 consisted in coming upon the crushed and broken body of a man who had wandered over the face of a cliff into a deep canyon. He was breathing when we found him;

he lived some hours afterward; he died as he had lived — a mystery. The guide of our party, one Primitivo de Soto, recognized him as the principal of the tale I had heard told in 1887. Briefly recapitulated, it was:

The man had first made his appearance in Mexico city during the summer of 1885. He had conducted himself strangely, and had either forgotten, or pretended to have done so, his identity. From Mexico city, he went to Morelia, thence to Chilpancingo, and thence into the mountains of Guerrero. For a time he disappeared, but in November, 1886, he was again in Mexico city, and soon thereafter he sailed for England on a tramp ship from Vera Cruz. Before he sailed away he confided to three different men the tale that his memory had been restored; that he was an English peer; that he had been attacked and beaten, on his wedding day; that he had utterly forgotten his own identity since then, until a few months before he sailed for England, and that he was then returning to claim his heritage and his bride. Three months later, in February, 1887, he reappeared in Mexico and returned to the mountains of Guerrero. To one of the men in whom he had previously confided, he related that he must have been deceived in his belief in the recovery of his memory; that upon returning

to England he discovered that the man he supposed himself to be, had never left that country; that Lord and Lady X (himself and his bride, as he supposed), were living happily and contentedly together; and *he*, therefore, had no idea who he really was. He explained that the likeness between Lord X and himself was most striking — a circumstance for which he could not account; at least he made no attempt to do so. He declared his purpose to be to return to the mountains, and to die among them, unknown.

That is the bare story, although it was given to me in much greater detail.

Those who have read the first, second or third editions of *A Gentleman of Quality*, will find that some alterations and changes have been made in this, the fourth edition; and I have decided to reply to the many letters of inquiry received by me concerning it, by this preface. The one part of my story that is entirely authentic, is the name of its hero: John Ashton. That was the name by which the mysterious man of the Guerreran mountains was known; it was the only name he ever gave.

Frederic van Rensselaer Day

New York City, June 4, 1909

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. THE COINCIDENT	I
II. THE INCIDENT	10
III. THE INTERVAL	38
IV. THE STORY — ROBERT'S DELUSION	52
V. ROBERT'S DELUSION — A FUTILE HOPE	66
VI. A COLLAPSE AND A CONFESSION	84
VII. THE PORTRAIT OF SIR RODERICK	101
VIII. THE IDENTIFICATION MARK	111
IX. BEHIND THE PORTRAIT	126
X. THE ONLY WAY	138
XI. THE MESSAGE ACROSS THE SEA	145
XII. AT HERTFORD'S FAVOURITE CLUB	161
XIII. THE FANCY OF DELIRIUM	177
XIV. WHAT HAPPENED DURING CONVALESCENCE	189
XV. WHICH OF TWO EVILS?	198
XVI. THE QUALITY OF A SIN	207
XVII. THE HAND OF GOD	215
XVIII. THE NEW LIFE	226
XIX. FEELING HIS WAY	235
XX. A STRANGE THING UNDER THE SUN	246
XXI. ROBERT IS PUT ON THE RACK	257
XXII. TWO SIDES TO A PICTURE	268
XXIII. THE MEETING	287

CHAPTER	PAGE
XXIV. THE CONFESSION	298
XXV. A STIRRING OF DEEP PASSIONS	313
XXVI. THE KEY TO THE MYSTERY	323
XXVII. THE AFTERMATH	334

A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

CHAPTER I

THE COINCIDENT

THE wedding bells were ringing from the tower of the Church of the Annunciation in London. The occasion was the celebration of the marriage of the Honourable Mercy Covington to John Makepeace Hertford, ninth earl of Ashton and Cowingford, and because the bride had for three seasons been the acknowledged beauty of London, the function was of unusual importance. For three successive seasons she had swayed the social world about her, and her marriage now to the man of her choice was considered an event. The young earl, just past thirty, was a man of sterling qualities and irreproachable character, and in his own way was quite as prominent a

2 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

favourite as the bride. Lady Mercy and Lord Ashton had known each other from childhood, and although there were years intervening when each seemed to have forgotten the existence of the other, save in the general way in which one remembers a playmate of childhood, fate had again brought them together in formal presentation. The wooing had been short and direct, and now the wedding which was among the first of the early morning weddings, held at sunrise, just as the sun begins to polish the visible world with a gloss of gold and ivory, when the birds begin their daily carols, and everything is fresh and green and glad. Not for one moment during the hours that followed the ceremony, the wedding breakfast at high noon, the informal reception during the afternoon, and the formal reception in the evening, were the bride and groom left to themselves. From the moment when the benediction was pronounced by the Dean, until they stood side by side again in the evening to receive their guests, they had exchanged not one word alone together. There was only now and then a silent handclasp or a whispered word of tenderness between them.

Then just at midnight when the spirit of gayety was at its height, Lord Ashton's valet thrust himself through the throng, and whispered something

in the ear of his master. Those who witnessed the act saw a look of intense annoyance on the face of the earl as he murmured a sentence in reply. The valet withdrew, and a moment later the earl followed him, pausing beside the bride as he passed her.

"I must leave you for a few moments, Mercy," he said. "Robert has brought me a message and I must attend to it." Then he smiled and left her, touching her white arm with the tips of his fingers as he withdrew.

It was that moment when the mystery was born; that instant of leaving his bride and the roomful of guests had a far reaching effect, and destiny was at that moment shaking the dice-box for a strange career in which the going out of the Earl of Ashton and Cowingford, on an apparently trivial errand, was the all important factor.

When a half hour had passed and he had not returned, the young countess became impatient, and others in the room wishing to depart, asked for the earl. Within an hour a servant was sent to find Lord Ashton, but returned presently unsuccessful. Then the bride directed that her husband's valet be sent to her at once. Old Robert was almost as well known to the countess as to the earl, for he had been John Hertford's

4 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

attendant, and was a man grown, in that long ago when the two were playmates. When he appeared, he did not wait for the question he knew she would ask, but anticipated it.

"I do not know, my lady," he said. "I gave him his hat and he went out, saying that he would return immediately. I have waited at the door for him ever since, and until your ladyship sent for me. I know that he has not returned."

"Why did he go out, Robert?"

"I do not know, my lady."

"You brought him the message which called him away?"

"Yes, my lady."

"What was it?"

"The message that was given to me was this: 'Say that his friend Tom must see him at once. He will understand.' I told him, and he did seem to understand. I gave him his hat and he left the house. By my love for him, Miss Mercy! — excuse me, my lady, — that is all I know."

Mercy was very white by now, for she was frightened. There was in her mind an inexplicable presentiment that he would not return, — that a great danger menaced him; but she controlled herself admirably.

"Robert," she said, presently, "repeat again

the message that was given to you. Repeat it word for word, just as it was delivered to you, for him."

"I have already done so, my lady. The message was, 'Say that his friend Tom must see him at once; he will understand.' That is the exact message, word for word, just as it was given to me — just as I repeated it to him."

"Did he seem to understand to whom the message referred?"

"Yes, my lady."

"Do you know to whom it referred?"

"No, my lady. His lordship looked annoyed when I mentioned the name. He made no comment."

"Was it a man who gave you the message?"

"Yes, my lady, a man and a stranger — not a gentleman. I think he was simply the bearer of the message."

"Robert, you have known the earl since he was born. What friend has he, who bears that name, who might have called him out in that manner, at this time, from such a gathering as this one?"

"My lady, I know of only two friends by that name, and they are both here in the house at this moment. I have no idea who it could have been."

Mercy was silent several moments. She was

6 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

endeavouring to control herself, and at last by a supreme effort she succeeded. When she did speak again, her voice was low and firm.

"Robert," she said, "the guests must not know. Nobody must know. I will leave the room, and you must announce that the earl is suddenly ill; that I have gone to him. Get them away, out of the house, all of them, everybody; then when they are gone, every one, come to me. Oh, Robert! What could have happened to him?"

"Alas, Lady Mercy — my lady — I do not know. Nothing, I think, only he has somehow been detained. He may come at any moment."

But he did not come. The guests, loud in their expressions of sympathy, departed. The lights were extinguished and the great house was shrouded in darkness, save for the glow from two windows in the apartments that had been refitted for the new countess. There, behind closely drawn shades, still arrayed in her reception costume of satin and pearls, the young countess was restlessly pacing the room, while before her, with downcast eyes and his hands behind his back, stood faithful old Robert. Three hours had passed since the earl left the parlours, and Robert had become dumb for lack of further argument to appease the anxiety of his mistress. His concern was as great as hers;

his ignorance as profound. Mercy had sent her maid to another part of the house; now she told Robert to recall her.

"The servants must not know that he is gone, Robert," she said wistfully. "He will surely return before long, and you must wait up for him. You will not desert your post?"

"No, my lady, no. I will wait."

"And the servants?"

"Take no heed of them, my lady. Leave it all to me; and if I may venture one word of advice —"

"Yes, Robert; what is it?"

"Let your maid put you to bed, and send her away as if nothing had happened. I will listen for your bell while I watch for my dear master. You see I used to call him Jack when he was a boy, and he likes to have me do so still, when we are alone."

"He loved you, Robert."

"He loved me, and he loves me now, my lady. He may be coming in at any moment, and I must be at the door."

The earl did not return. The night wore away and the following day dragged itself into the past; still he did not come. After that there were weary days and nights, and then there were weary weeks; but there was never a word or a

8 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

sign of the earl — never a trace of him after he passed through the door on his wedding night.

The great house was closed and the servants were dismissed. Robert alone remained in charge of the mansion, and Robert alone knew that its mistress, the beautiful young countess, dwelt there in solitude while the world — their world — believed that she and the earl were travelling abroad; and that same world had so many other things to engage its attention, that it soon made up its mind to forget them until they returned.

Robert — dear old Robert — was maid, cook, everything, even father to the countess at that awful time. When he was not attending to her wants he was wandering the streets in search of his master. He was tireless, almost sleepless, possessed of one idea — that he could, and one day would, find the Earl of Ashton.

Mercy never left her rooms. Her tearless eyes never looked from the windows save at night when the room was dark, and her white, set face could not be seen from without. But she waited and hoped; and as time went on, waited almost without hope.

Once and only once, Robert suggested Scotland Yard and the police.

"No," she replied; "we will wait. If he lives he will return. If he is dead there is no need to

search. In either case we must be silent. The world shall not know when or how he went away, nor when or how he returns. If he is found, you, Robert, will find him, or he will return to me here."

Thus the weeks lengthened into months, until they were near the end of the twelfth since his disappearance; until time lacked only a few days, to arrive at the first anniversary of the wedding. And still the world in which Lord Ashton had lived and moved, believed that he was travelling abroad with his wife; and still Robert and the countess dwelt on alone, in hiding, in secrecy, and in despair.

CHAPTER II

THE INCIDENT

THE date was the same as that of the wedding at the Church of the Annunciation in London. The scene was altogether different, for it was the interior of a bank in the city of New York at a time when all banks are supposed to be deserted — the so called small hours of the morning when even the bustle of the metropolis seems to hesitate as if waiting for the dawn of a new day. Outside the bank the streets were as light as they always are in the business portions of a great city, where the frequent points of illumination dispel the gloom, however dense it may be. Humanity strode past in either direction just as it always does wherever it is hived within the confines of a metropolitan centre. It never sleeps; always moving, thinning out during the middle watches of the night, thickening up again as the hours tend toward the dawn. But it is a heedless humanity and it rarely looks to the right or to the left. It did not look toward the

bank then, or if it did, it paid no heed, for the man who entered the side door with a key that fitted the lock paused after he had entered and stood for a full minute before a window where all who passed that way might have seen him.

The man was John Ashton. Perhaps no one would have thought to question his right to be there; many might have regarded his presence there at that hour as unnecessary or strange, but his right was unquestionable since he possessed a key and was cashier of the institution. And the bank itself was a private one, the acknowledged property of the great Henry Hollister, capitalist, financier, juggler of millions, dictator of many national destinies. Ashton passed into the counting-room, where he switched on more lights, seated himself in the president's chair, and with his hands thrust into his pockets he remained for a long time as motionless as a dead man. A physiognomist could have divined nothing from his stony countenance. All that any one could have observed was that the face was handsome and noble, delicate and patrician, and that his eyes, when he raised them, were clear and steadfast though troubled. Presently he shivered as he might have done had a cold draught of air blown upon him. Then he

12 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

rose from the chair and paced slowly to and fro with bowed head, and with his hands clasped behind his back. Often he unclasped them and clenched his fists as if he would master the problem that bothered him, master it by sheer force of will and brain. But his hands always returned to their former position behind his back, and he resumed the meditative pacing.

John Ashton had reached the crisis of his life. The history of that life can be told in a paragraph. It had been simple, straightforward, upright and just. Henry Hollister, whom he knew as his uncle, had been a father to him, had reared him as a son, and from a time that antedated Ashton's memory. He had passed through the phases of school and college life, and had filled the lesser posts of clerkship in the Hollister bank until now he was cashier of that institution, and was destined in time to become its president and to inherit the millions that Henry Hollister had amassed. He could not remember the time when he and Hope Hollister had not been promised to each other when they should grow up. It began in their play when Hope's dolls represented their family; it continued when they trudged to school together, and as they approached maturity the roots of their affection took a firmer, deeper hold; and now the wedding was fixed. They

were to be married in the autumn on Hope's twenty-first birthday, for that it should not be sooner was a matter upon which the banker had been insistent. There had never been a cloud in the horizon of John Ashton's life until now. But now — he shivered as he thought of it — a cloud that was huge and black and overwhelming had fallen upon him from the clearest skies. A moment of purest folly had created that cloud which now extended seemingly from horizon to zenith in his life. A moment of folly; a moment when he had forgotten Hope and all that she meant to him. There had been other follies after that — inexcusable ones, and then the inevitable reaping of the whirlwind in which jealousy had played its part. The woman scorned had become the proverbial fury; she had gone to Hope; she had somehow made Hope listen, and — now he was here at the bank awaiting Hope by Hope's request; nay, her command.

It was a strange letter that Hope had written him, making that appointment at the counting-room of the bank after she should leave the reception at Madame Savage's. He had not tried to conjecture what that other woman had said. He knew something of the evil possibilities of her character. Knowing as she must know, that she had lost him, she would not hesitate as

14 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

to the means of destroying him, even if the price of it were her own moral doom and social downfall. He knew her, alas, too well! Too well, indeed! Could Hope be made to believe that any woman, for any cause, would ever falsely charge herself so vilely? He knew Hope Hollister, too. Her pure and lofty spirit would have forgiven the sin itself rather than the deception involved in it. There would be no condoning that. He knew that in all the world there is nothing so austere, so relentlessly cruel as the judgment of the young woman who is without guile. Ashton knew what to expect from Hope Hollister, and yet — and yet he wondered if she might not relent and forgive.

He had read the letter but once, but even with that one reading it was not difficult for him to picture the scene that had occurred. He knew himself guiltily wrong in having idled away an hour here and there in permitting another woman to coquette with him; but he had intended no wrong, committed no actual misdeed. Yet, Hope's letter! It was terrible! He felt that in it he was charged with the worst that could have happened — knew from those pages that he had been so charged by the woman herself. It seemed incredible, and yet — then he read the letter again while he waited.

"There is a condition of mind, John, so conclusive in its reasoning that it dwarfs all other considerations, even those of the heart. That condition is mine at the present moment. I scarcely know what to say to you now that I have begun to write, although I know all the time what it is that must be said. It is certain that I can never be your wife, certain now that I never should be, certain that it would be an affront to Heaven and before God if after what has happened, after what has been revealed to me of your nature, after this knowledge of your injustice has been thrust upon me, I should ever consent to become one with you in the holy bonds of wedlock. Shame on you, John, for what you have done to me. Shame be upon you for ever for the betrayal of my love, my confidence, my trust in you. Shame, shame, shame!

"I feel at this moment as if I should never hold my head up among people again; for having trusted you, and had my trust betrayed, leaves me as a wreck upon the sands of the sea, without hope of salvage, without redress against the storms that have buffeted me — ah, God! without anything left save my own shame that I have loved you all too well.

"How could you do it, John? How could you betray the trust of a pure young woman? How

16 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

could you pretend love for her when your only passion was lust? Did you not realize when you committed the deed, to what a dreadful pass it must ultimately condemn me? Could you not foresee what the result of your perfidy must be? Was there no mentor near your heart to warn you that you must for ever lose me, after that happened? Or did you suppose that we could go on just the same afterward? Did you not realize that you were making me your victim? That you were condemning me to eternal sorrow? For the shame must be mine, John, almost as much as your own, although I am an entirely innocent party in the affair, and knew nothing whatever about it until it was over and past.

“ And all the while you were telling me that you loved me; all the while you were breathing tenderness into my ears; all the while that you were perfecting your plans and laying your snares for the ruin of a soul, you were holding my hands, kissing my lips — pretending to love me. To love me, forsooth! It is only yourself that you have loved from the first, and were there even no actual sin behind your act, if only the wish to commit it were there, I should still repudiate you wholly, I should still cast you off as I do now, I should still look upon you with

horror, think of you with loathing, recall you to memory with disgust.

“ And yet, God help me, I love you, love you!

“ But I must cast you off. I cannot have you touch me again. I cannot live and feel your presence near me. After what you have done — after the sin you have committed against me, without considering what you have done to others — our paths must lie as wide apart as the poles.

“ I go to Madame Savage's to-night with my father. I know that you have been bidden, also, but I have heard you say that you do not intend to go, so I shall leave this letter on the table in your room for you to find. You will understand it only too well when you read the words which in full bitterness of heart I have written here. It is not possible that I can leave Madam's before two; possibly it will be even later; I do not know. But I feel that I must have one last interview with you before I retire this night. There are certain things which you must promise me to do, and they must be done forthwith.

“ So go to the bank and wait in the counting-room for me until I come. If you are there by half-past two it will be time enough; I should arrive soon after that. I ask you to meet me there because I do not feel that I could hold

18 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

this necessary interview with you under the roof of my father's house, where we have grown up together from childhood. I could not discuss this thing with you there — I will not discuss anything with you there ever again. If you sit at the table in my father's house again, I will not enter the dining-room; if you remain in the house another night after this one, I will go away and remain away until you have taken your departure from it. That is how I feel, John; that is how I must act — and you know why, because you know what fault you have committed. So meet me there at the bank as I have asked you to do; meet me for the last time, for hereafter — But I will leave that part of the subject until to-night. Perhaps it would have been better had I left it all till then. When I began to write I intended merely to ask you to meet me there, but the horror that lies on my soul because of you is so great and so terrible that I have not been able to withhold these words; they have written themselves. Ah, the anguish of it all, John! The folly of it! The pity of it!"

Ashton realized already even while trying to convince himself that he did not, that Hope would be relentless, that she would listen to no denial, that she had already decided the woman's story

to be true, and that nothing he could say could change her. But he could not see into his own future. He could not know that this very circumstance was one of the dice of Fate that had been cast against his present career. Born to another sphere of life, Destiny meant that he should fill it, and already, more than three thousand miles away, in the city of London was setting out the mile posts of his future. He was still striding restlessly up and down the room when the rattle of carriage wheels on the pavement arrested his attention, and he paused to listen while the vehicle was whirled around the corner and drew up at the side door of the bank. Ashton caught his breath sharply as he listened. Hope Hollister, the one woman in all the world to him, was at the door; in another moment he would admit her, and presently he would know whether she believed him, or would continue to believe the story of the other woman. He admitted her before she could press the electric button, and he stood aside for her to pass along the narrow, tiled corridor to the counting-room. Then he followed her.

She had taken her stand with her back against the end of the heavy oaken directors' table, with her hands behind her, and resting upon it. Her face was pale and beautiful and infinitely sad.

20 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

Her eyes large and luminously black gazed upon him sorrowfully, and yet with unconcealed love in their depths. She was calm, broodingly calm, like the hush that precedes the hurricane, he thought. He felt that the very placidity of their greeting was charged with ominous import. He halted just inside the door, gazing at her with his soul in his eyes. She was the woman he loved. It seemed to him that he had never realized before how beautiful she was, how superior to other women, how sweet and pure and good.

"Hope!" he said after a moment, breathing her name as if it were a prayer; and he took a step nearer to her. But she raised one hand quickly, and repelled him, and then permitted it to return to its former position behind her as if she required its additional support.

"I wrote you the note asking you to meet me here after the reception, and left it in your room at home where you would find it," she began without preface, "because I believed it to be the better way. Perhaps my logic is at fault. Doubtless I should not have come here to meet you at this hour of the night; but — there seemed to me to be no other adequate way. It will be our last interview, John, and I wished it to be entirely without witnesses, and without the chance of interruption."

"Our last interview, Hope? Surely you cannot mean that." Ashton caught his breath sharply. His fingers clenched into the palms of his hands, but he stood straight and still before her, and only an added paleness evidenced the shock her words gave him.

"Our last interview," she repeated, deadly calm. "Surely you must have known that I intended it so. You must withdraw yourself from daily association with me on one pretext or another. I leave that to you. But we must not, we cannot live longer under the same roof. We have grown up together from babyhood as a brother and sister might have done. For a little more than a year we have been betrothed; and I have loved you, John, as only a woman of my temperament can love. I love you now, to my infinite shame! God help me!"

"Hope! Hope! Oh, my love —"

"Stop, John. Stand where you are. Do not come nearer to me. You have wronged me beyond the hope of reparation; wronged me and outraged my love for you so vilely that I look upon you now and think of you now with horror and aversion. Do not interrupt me. We will not discuss the whys and wherefores of this unfortunate scene. The time for that is past. You have sown the seed and you shall reap the

22 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

harvest even though the bitter weeds of it, and the rowen, shall be mine also. The shame of it all is yours, not mine; but the bitterness of it, the pity of it, the hopelessness of it, is mine alone. You will go out into the world seeking new scenes, new faces, new affections and a new environment, and presently you will forget; or if you do not quite do that, your memory will be dulled and blunted into semi-forgetfulness. But I? I must for ever remain what I am now — Hope Hollister, with the shadow of lost love, lost confidence, lost soul, almost, over my life. And you have done this by a thoughtless, impetuous act, unmindful of my confidence in you, of my love for you. Shame on you, John, to treat me so! Shame on you to have brought me to the pass of meeting you here in secret in the counting-room of my father's bank, to dismiss you! I could never be your wife now, John. The holiness has all gone out of it. You have left no uncut leaves in your book of life. I should look upon you with horror and think of you with loathing if you were my husband, after what has occurred. I speak harshly, I know. I meant to do so in order that there might be no mistake, no argument, no repetition of this interview, or any part of it."

"But Hope — sweetheart — may I not speak in my own defence? May there not be some way

to convince you — ” He stopped, for again she held up her right hand, repellently.

“ No,” she said. “ You may not speak in your own defence. It is too late for that now.”

“ I have sinned, Hope; I know it; I admit it; but not with the motive, nor after the manner that you now believe. I have wronged you, I have tried your confidence in me to the breaking point, but all the time I have loved you — only you. You see things much blacker than they are. Forgive me, Hope! Let us forget all this and be happy again. Be my wife as you have promised to be. As such you will not only forgive, but you will forget.” He spoke rapidly, impetuously, stepping nearer to her and stretching out his arms toward her in supplication.

But she did not move. That expression of stony calm did not leave her face.

“ That is all,” she said, as if she had not heard him. “ If you speak truthfully, and there is still a portion of love, a moiety of respect in your heart for me, you will make arrangements for changing your place of abode at once. Make what pretext you will. Tell my father that I have jilted you, that I have sent you away. It is the truth and I will uphold you in it. But, John Ashton ” — her eyes blazed almost fiercely into his for that instant — “ I would not be your wife now, I

24 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

would not kneel before God's altar with you now, after what has happened, if all the world were to plead with me in your behalf. That is all. You may let me out of the bank, if you please."

She started to pass him, going toward the door, and in that instant when he realized that he was losing her for ever, when he understood that if she left him now it would be never to return, he lost control of himself. He threw out his arms and seized upon her; he hugged her lithe body against him, showering kisses upon her hair, for he could not reach her face, and all the while he talked rapidly, incoherently, with passionate despair.

"You shall not go, Hope! You must not leave me so. I cannot bear it! It will kill me! It is killing you! Forgive! Forget! Rise above it all! I love you! love you!" And throughout it all she struggled desperately.

But suddenly he released her. He fell back away from her gasping. He had chanced to raise his eyes and they had fallen upon a figure in the doorway at the opposite end of the room; the doorway that communicated between the counting-room and the private office of Henry Hollister.

Hope saw his sudden alarm. Her gaze followed his and discovered the cause of it, but in-

stead of being frightened by the unexpected appearance of her father there, her eyes flamed with anger that the interview had been overheard — that he should have dared to listen.

The old man came forward slowly. His handsome, smoothly shaven face was as hard as granite, his eyes as cold and relentless as polished marble. A few feet away from them he paused; and when he spoke it was with the same voice he would have used in calling a meeting of his directors to order.

"I will conduct you to the carriage, Hope," he said. "John Ashton, you will remain where you are till I return."

It was strange that it did not occur to John Ashton then that Hope's father might easily misconstrue the significance of the interview he had overheard; that interview which he had evidently planned to overhear. The "other woman" had not once been mentioned or referred to. There had been no mention of a third party to the wrong with which she had charged him. Throughout it all she had spoken and acted as if the sin were directly against her. She had taken the stand of a pure woman who is utterly without guile, and who, since time immemorial, has cast away the loaf because a bit of mould has specked the crust. Her pride of purity

26 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

and of self esteem had been outraged because for a moment her lover had wandered, and she had somehow been led to believe the worst of his digression. Had Henry Hollister kept his hands off, a month, or six months, or a year would have discovered his daughter stretching out her arms again toward John Ashton with all her confidence in him restored, and all her love magnified by the temporary separation. Hope was unreasonable in her conclusions, relentless in her decisions, cruel in her repudiation of the man she loved, pitiless in her condemnation. With the unreasoning selfishness of a young woman who loves for the first time, and who has idealized her lover, she regarded what she believed John Ashton had done, wholly and solely as a sin against herself. But Ashton did not consider this, he did not think of it at all while he awaited the return of Henry Hollister.

He came, presently. He had taken his daughter to the carriage, in utter silence; in silence he had turned away, uttering but one word to his coachman, and that was, "Home!" Then he strode back into the bank, closing the two doors carefully after him as he entered.

Ashton had moved around to the opposite side of the big directors' table, so that when the two men faced each other, it was across it; and

for a moment which seemed endless to both, they looked clearly and squarely into each other's eyes. It was Ashton who broke the silence.

"I had no idea that you were in the private office, sir," he said, lamely.

"No," replied the banker. "I did not intend that you should have such an idea." And then his wrath burst forth in a blaze of insensate fury, for Henry Hollister was a strong old man and a passionate one. His black eyes snapped fire. His leonine, Webster-like features seemed sharper and cleaner cut than ever. His olive complexion became ashen in hue. "Oh, you hound!" He seemed to shout the words, but always without a raise in his voice. "You scoundrel! You ingrate! You viper that stings the hand that has nurtured and caressed you! What have you done? What have you done to me — and to her?"

John Ashton was never more astounded in his life than then. Was his uncle mad, or what could have induced him to assume that attitude? Had he, after all, listened to the words of that interview? If so, why did he not understand that it was Hope who had repudiated her lover, and not Ashton who had repelled her? He was bewildered.

28 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

"Uncle Henry —" he began, but the old man interrupted him fiercely.

"Don't 'Uncle Henry' me, you cur!" he cried. "I am not your uncle, thank God! You are no relation to me or mine. You are a foundling whom I discovered in a basket at my front door when you were a month old, or less. You are the bastard offspring of some illicit love upon whom I took pity, whom I received into my own house, whom I raised to manhood as one of my own kin, whom I have nurtured and loved as a son, to whom I would have given my daughter for wife, to whom I intended to leave my fortune! And now, now —? 'Oh, my God!'"

He turned his back to Ashton for a moment, and great sobs shook him; but he controlled them, and, wheeling, returned to the attack.

Utter amazement was the only expression in John Ashton's face and eyes. Before this last statement of Henry Hollister's, he stood completely appalled. In the face of the assertion that he was a nobody, even the agony of Hope's desertion was momentarily belittled, half forgotten. He was still ignorant of the cause of the old banker's tirade against him, but even that was unimportant in view of the revelation that had just been made to him. Not once did it occur to him that the old man had placed a

horrible misconstruction upon the conversation he had overheard; that the banker had already convicted him of the worst of all crimes against his house and the daughter of that house — betrayal. The horror of it was yet to come.

“And now, what have you done to me?” cried the old man, leaning his weight upon the table in front of him and bending far across it so that he fairly snarled into the face of the younger man. “How have you repaid me for the care I have given you, for the love I have bestowed upon you, for the confidence I have reposed in you? I should have known, thirty years ago when I took you from my doorstep, that the day would come when you would bite the hand that fed you, dog that you are! I should have known that the sin of your unknown father and probably disreputable mother had poisoned your blood and your morals like a scrofula. And you dare to stand there before me, looking me in the face as if you were as innocent of wrong as a child unborn!”

“Mr. Hollister” — Ashton spoke calmly and gravely — “upon my soul I do not in the least understand why you should suddenly evince such anger toward me. I am conscious of no wrong against you, sir. Through all the years of my life, since I have been old enough to understand,

30 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

I have loved you as a father; and now, when you tell me that I have never had a claim upon you, that I am a foundling, a nobody, I — I am overwhelmed with gratitude for what you have done. But I think, sir, that I am glad you have told me the truth. It was necessary that I should leave your house and your employ at once, anyway. You overheard what Hope said to me and you know why that is so. And now, this — ”

“ Damn you!” shouted the banker with another outburst of fury. Then he turned and darted to one corner of the room where a small safe stood against the wall, and he dropped upon one knee in front of it and spun the dial fiercely, preparatory to opening it. Ashton continued calmly with what he had to say.

“ And now this revelation you have made to me concerning my birth makes it all so much easier. It furnishes an excuse for my going away. If I am a nobody, as you say, I am not fit to become Hope’s husband under any circumstances. You should tell her what you have revealed to me. She should know the truth. Possibly it will lessen the pain she suffers because of this parting, for I am convinced that Hope loves me. You do not know of the circumstances that led to the interview you overheard to-night, but if you will permit me, I will explain them to you.

You will understand then that there is perhaps some excuse — ”

The old man leaped to his feet and whirled upon Ashton like a tiger, his features convulsed with rage, his eyes blazing with fury. In his right hand he held a small, silver-mounted revolver that he had taken from the safe, and now he crouched, bending forward a trifle, and with the muzzle pointing remorselessly at Ashton's heart; and the younger man, when he saw the act and realized what it meant, stood staring, like one who is hypnotized.

“I am going to kill you, John Ashton,” the banker said, coldly, but with implacable wrath in his voice. “I am going to kill you, John Ashton, for what you have done to me and mine,” he repeated. “John Ashton! Bah! The name is not even yours. I gave it to you in remembrance of a friend I had in college, in England. I named you for one of his titles. Thank heaven I did not give you his family name.”

“Shoot, sir,” said Ashton, calmly, and smiling for the first time. “It will be a very small thing to give up my life to you, if you demand it.”

The old man lowered the muzzle of the weapon, but he retained his grasp upon it.

“Perhaps, after all,” he muttered, “it were better to let you live. You are a nobody; a

32 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

thing without parentage, without a name, without existence; a blot, an abomination, a pestilence. Even my daughter whom you have wronged believes that you will best get your deserts by living, otherwise she would have killed you herself. She is of my blood and bone."

"But I have never wronged her, sir; at least not wilfully. She —"

"You lie! I read the letter that she wrote to you asking you to meet her here after the reception. I stood in that room and listened to every word that passed between you. I wonder now why I hesitate to shoot you down? I wonder! But I will not; no, I will not. You shall live, and by living you will be made to suffer far more than the mere pain of death could inflict upon you. How much money have you on deposit in this bank, that is your own, John Ashton?"

"None at all save what I have earned because of your bounty and goodness to me, sir."

"Answer me. How much money have you on deposit in this bank?"

"I have a trifle — a few dollars only, over ten thousand dollars."

"And I have that much here, in this safe. It was paid to me yesterday, too late to put it in the vault." He turned to the safe again, reached inside for a package of money and tossed it on

the table. "There are ten thousand dollars in that package; write your check for it."

"But, sir, I —"

"Write your check for it, I say. Or sign your name in blank and I will fill it in, later. Write, or by heaven I'll kill you!" He raised the pistol again, and Ashton, with a shrug, scrawled his name, John C. Ashton, at the bottom of the check. "Now put that money in your pocket, and go," commanded the old man.

Ashton dropped the package of money into the inside pocket of his coat, which he then buttoned around him. He reached for his hat which was on the table, took two steps toward the door, and stopped. Turning, he faced again the still infuriated banker.

"Mr. Hollister," he said, and he drew a step nearer to the man, "won't you tell me why your love and affection for me have so suddenly turned to anger and hate? It cannot be because of my obscure birth, for you have known that always. Then why is it? It breaks my heart to leave you in this manner, sir. I thought there could be no feeling left in it after Hope's repudiation of me, but —"

"Stop where you are, John Ashton, or I will yet kill you before you leave the room. Do you think that even yet you can play the innocent,

34 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

and hoodwink me? Don't you know that if the truth were known, I would be justified in killing you? Don't you know that I ought to shoot you down like a dog, like the ingrate that you are, for what you have done? What other father in all the broad land, who had listened to a daughter's confession as I have heard my daughter confess, to-night, would control himself as I have done? And you, who wronged her, you who have outraged her purity and innocence and have spoiled her life — *you*, who — ”

With a quick, cat-like spring John Ashton caught the banker by the throat and choked back further utterance. With the same motion he tore the revolver from the old man's grasp and sent it flying across the room; then he released the hold upon his throat and caught him by the shoulders, holding him there at arm's length and glaring down upon him with more consummate fierceness than Hollister, even, had shown that night. He understood now. He comprehended at last, the meaning of it all.

“My God!” he cried out. “*You* believe that? *You?* *Her father!* Why, you miserable old reprobate! You accursed man! You believe that of your daughter? Of Hope? *You?* *You?* God! I wish now that you had shot me before you dared to utter such a monstrous

thought. Why, if you weren't her father, I'd — I'd break your damned neck!"

Hollister struggled mightily, and he was a powerful man although his once great strength was now only spasmodic; but he succeeded in tearing himself from Ashton's grasp and then with a desperate effort he recovered possession of the pistol. But the younger man was upon him again, and once more he succeeded in tearing it away from him so that it fell to the floor the second time.

"It's true! It's true! You know it's true!" the old man cried out in his fury. "It is in her letter to you, almost in plain words. She talked it to you and charged you with it and you did not deny it. You could not. You confessed it. Ah! You are chok —"

The cry ended in a gurgle, and at the same instant Ashton threw the older man forcibly from him. He staggered backward a few steps, then fell; and in falling his head struck forcibly against the edge of the open door of the small safe, and he collapsed upon the floor in a huddled heap.

For a long time John Ashton stood looking down upon him, barely conscious of what he had done. But bit by bit the fury left him; little by little his sound and sober judgment returned. Gradually his face cleared, and after a time that

36 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

might have been a few minutes or a year so far as his sensations were concerned, he lifted the body from the floor and bore it to the couch. Then he got down upon his knees and with his ear pressed against Henry Hollister's bosom listened for the beating of that heart he had loved so long and well. But he heard nothing. There was not a sound or a motion that he could detect.

"I have killed him!" he gasped, rising at last to his feet. "I have killed Hope's father — my own more than father;" and he walked backward step by step until he brought up against the end of the table to which he clung as a drowning man might have seized upon a floating plank. It seemed hours after that, while he remained gazing with fascinated eyes upon the thing that was stretched upon the couch, and he was only brought to his senses by the rumbling and clatter of a heavy wagon that passed along the street.

Ashton sighed heavily. He turned to the table, seated himself, and drawing a pad of paper toward him, he wrote:

"We quarrelled. There was a struggle. I threw him from me and he fell, striking his head against the safe. I had no thought of injuring him, but he is dead, and by my hand.

"JOHN C. ASHTON."

After an interval he crossed to the couch again, bent forward and pressed his lips against the banker's forehead; then, calmly he snapped off the lights, and passed out upon the street.

CHAPTER III

THE INTERVAL

It is impossible to describe the emotions which surged within the heart and brain and being of John Ashton when he left the bank and walked through the almost deserted streets of the city. The thought of escape had not yet occurred to him, and when the door closed behind him, he actually paused and stood there upon the steps; paused and waited without any object in view, for he was objectless at that moment. There was still a number of hours that must intervene between that time and the period when the city would be astir with the busy life of another day. He stroked his black, pointed beard, thoughtfully, and now and then twisted nervously upon the ends of his moustache. His face was white and set, but it betrayed nothing of the tempest that was raging within him. Presently he started away aimlessly, not because he desired to go anywhere, but because he found solace in the exertion of walking, and he strode on and on,

until he stood at the entrance to the park just as the darkness began to give way to dawn and the birds commenced to twitter among the trees.

He turned toward the west, wandering onward with the same slow tread, vaguely intending to return to the bank when it should be time for the business of the day to begin; and so, when he arrived at the junction of Fifty-ninth street and Broadway, he turned southward again, and he pursued that course until he arrived at Sixth Avenue, which he followed for a considerable distance.

A barber was opening his shop — a basement shop, near Twenty-fifth Street — as he passed, and it occurred to Ashton that a shampoo would do much to dispel the confusion in his brain. He entered and seated himself in the chair, and while the barber was placing the towel around his neck, he said carelessly:

“ You may shave off my beard and moustache.”

He could not have told why he gave the order. It was not the result of consideration. He had not given the matter a thought until that moment, and even when he uttered the request, the idea of avoiding recognition by that means had not occurred to him; but when, thirty minutes later, he rose from the chair and adjusted his collar, peering at himself in the mirror as he did so, he

40 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

gave a start of surprise at the change that had been wrought in his presence. His complexion, naturally fair, was paler than ever now. Where the beard had been removed, and in contrast with the wavy blackness of his hair, it was almost white. His nose seemed larger since the disappearance of the heavy moustache, but it was as straight and clean cut as though it were carved out by the chisel of a master sculptor. His eyes seemed larger, too, as though the deep blue in their depths were enhanced by the removal of the hair from his face; and the pupils of unusual size gave one the idea that they were black. The change, also, brought out the lines of his mouth in all their firmness. There were touches of humour around the corners, but for the present, sadness and severity had marked them for their own.

"I look like another man," he mused. "If I had cared for a disguise, I could not have thought of a better one than this. Perhaps it is as well that I am shaven. I will let chance decide what I am to do. I will make no attempt to avoid recognition. I will not hide, but if I am not arrested before night, I will leave New York and America for ever. So be it. Chance shall decide for me."

He paid his bill and departed without a word,

and all that day he went about the streets of the city, as unconcerned as though he were engaged upon his every-day affairs.

The condition of his mind was remarkable. He scarcely thought of Henry Hollister at all, and if he did, it was only with regret that the man was, as he supposed, dead, not with the feeling of guilt upon his conscience that he had killed him. That would come later when he had partially recovered from the anguish of his life-long separation from Hope. The death of her father had severed whatever imaginary link there might have remained, connecting her to him.

During the day, he met and passed upon the streets many acquaintances, but not one of them recognized him, even though his dress was the same as yesterday. When, years afterwards, he looked back upon that day, he realized that he must have been in a semi-stupor, irresponsible for what he did, and for what he failed to do. But he could not realize it at the time.

Boys attempted to sell papers to him, and he heard them cry something relative to the bank where he had worked all his life, something about Henry Hollister; but he did not understand what they said, and he would not read the papers, believing that he already knew more than the printed columns could tell him.

42 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

Afternoon found him at the corner of Wall Street and Broadway, and he realized that he had been walking steadily for nearly twelve hours — that he had neither eaten nor rested in all that time; and at that moment, two gentlemen, satcheled and bundled, hurried past him in the direction of the East river. He heard one of them say to the other, in Spanish:

“ Querida Cuba! No mas que tres dias, Manuelito.”

Ashton smiled. The haphazard words conveyed the suggestion for which his disturbed soul had been longing. Travel! Reposing safely within his pockets there were still the ten thousand dollars that Henry Hollister had forced upon him — his own personal property. The money belonged to him, and to him alone. His own hands were clean. The money would defray his expenses and start him anew in another part of the world. The impulse was upon him. He crossed the street, and in a moment, without realizing the price he paid, had purchased a satchel. There was a haberdasher around the corner, and he hurried there, filled the bag with whatever the clerk suggested, and almost before he comprehended that he had formed a resolution, he was hastening down Wall street toward the Ward Line pier.

Thus the steamship sailed away with him. He went to Cuba, and for a week wandered aimlessly about the city of Havana, doing nothing; only thinking; always thinking. He constantly hungered for news from home, but he as studiously avoided it.

"It is the only way to forget," he thought, when the longing for information concerning Hope almost overcame him; and he fled from the intelligence that was his chief desire, just as the reformed drunkard flees from convivial friends of the besotted past.

Thence he took ship to Yucatan, and he passed a month in Merida. Thence to Vera Cruz and Mexico; and then on and on, pausing for a day or a week in one place and another until at last he found himself in San Francisco.

But that was too near home; and he was not sufficiently far away from John Ashton — and Hope — so he sailed for China and Japan.

His habits were regular. He indulged in no excesses of any kind. He made no friends, hardly any acquaintances. Fellow travellers regarded him at first with displeasure, and then with interest, for he was cordiality itself when addressed, but never once began a conversation, and always brought to a close as soon as possible one that was introduced by another.

44 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

After China and Japan, he visited other countries of the East. He passed considerable time in India, and he hesitated a long while in Egypt. He went to Turkey, to Italy, to Algiers, to France and to Paris.

In the last place there were weeks and months of indecision. He had not yet determined what he would do with that future of which he had as yet scarcely thought; but one day he took the train and journeyed to the coast, crossed the channel and went up to London.

The morning of his second day in London brought with it a troop of ghosts. His face was drawn and haggard and whiter than ever, for this day was the anniversary of that one which preceded the night of events so tragic in his life.

Ashton rose early that morning, breakfasted, and started out for a walk. It made no difference to him in what direction his footsteps took him, and he wandered on and on until he was in the country, and on and on still farther, until he entered a village, and recognized the streets of Greenwich. He paused several times in the main thoroughfare to watch the street fakirs at their games, studying the freaks of the educated dogs, and the sabre swinging of the retired dragoon with serious interest.

It was noon when he arrived at the Old Ship

inn, and he dined on whitebait in the open air, lazily and absently watching the tan coloured sails as they floated up and down the Thames, envying the rugged boatmen, wishing that he could change existence with the poorest of humanity around him, wondering how much longer he could endure the life he had lived for an entire year.

In that manner passed several hours, until the afternoon was far advanced, and he bethought himself of returning to London. Presently, when one of the little side wheel steamers drew in at the wharf, he got aboard and was carried among the maze of craft which crowded the water of the famous river.

The boat landed him in the vicinity of London Bridge, and again he walked on and on until he found himself at Piccadilly Circus. There, he paused a little while, and again strode on to the top of St. James Street, and once more halted. It was dark now, and only the street lights illuminated the scene, but that was sufficient to enable one to recognize friends as they passed.

Ashton was thinking out the problem of returning to New York and surrendering himself to the law. There was no happiness in the aimless, wandering life he was leading, and during

46 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

the entire day he had been wondering if it would not be better for him to go back to the scene of the crime he believed he had committed, and give himself up, and he had about decided that he would do so, when he was roused from his stupor by feeling a hand upon his arm, and hearing a voice pronounce his name.

"My lord," said the voice. "Jack — your lordship — thank God I have found you!"

Ashton turned to find himself almost in the embrace of a man who was past the prime of life and who bore the unmistakable stamp of a respectable upper servant.

"Oh, Jack — dear Jack — my lord — you are alive and well, are you not? I am not dreaming? It is really you? I have searched for you every day all the year; every day; and I knew that I would find you. You will go home with me, my lord? Everything is just as you left it. Does your lordship remember that it is just one year ago to-night that you went away?"

The man talked rapidly, so that Ashton had no chance to speak until he had finished; and he was startled when he was reminded that it was indeed the anniversary of his going away.

"Who are you?" he asked the stranger, wondering if he had been really mistaken for another person, or if the old man was crazy.

"Ah, my lord — my boy — don't say that you have forgotten Robert. These old arms carried you when you were too young to walk. Don't say that you do not remember Robert. You will go home with me now, won't you? "

"I have not forgotten you, Robert, if that is your name, for the reason that I never knew you," said Ashton calmly.

"Never knew me? Never knew old Robert? Have you forgotten, my lord, who I am? "

"Robert," said Ashton, slowly, "I perceive that you are in earnest, and that you mean all you say; that you believe it. But you have made a mistake. I am not the man you seek. I am not a lord. You are an entire stranger to me. I have never seen you before. You will have to search elsewhere for your master. I wish that I might help you to find him."

The expression of that wish was like a flood of light upon Robert's intellect. He was positive in his own mind that it was his master who stood before him. He remembered having read of strange cases of men who had wandered away, forgetful of their own identities, of the faces of old friends, of everything, and he felt sure that the earl was suffering from a malady of that sort. It explained his strange disappearance; it accounted for the continued absence; and

48 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

it brought a pathetic happiness to the old servant, for by reason of it he knew that his master had not wilfully absented himself from his home, his friends and his bride.

"If I can only induce him to go back with me," was the thought in Robert's mind when Ashton expressed the wish to assist him in the search for his master, and he grasped at the straw thus thrown out.

"You are so like him, sir," he faltered, finding it hard to pretend to deceive the man before him, whom he so thoroughly believed to be the earl. "Perhaps you could assist me. Will you tell me your name, sir?"

"Ashton," was the calm reply, for the reveries of the day had decided him to reassume the one given him by Henry Hollister, and Robert smiled, well pleased, for the name was another proof of the correctness of his theory.

"My master is the Earl of Ashton, sir. Ashton and Cowingford. Is your Christian name John, sir?"

"Yes. My full name is John Cowingford Ashton. I was named for an Englishman; perhaps he was a relative of your master's. It is the only way in which I can explain the coincidence. Now what can I do to help you, Robert?"

"Oh, you can do a great deal, I know. Will

you come home with me and let me tell you the story? ”

“ No, no; you can come to me to-morrow. Perhaps it will give me some interest in life if I assist you in this search.”

“ Come with me now, sir. It is early yet, and you will see nobody but me. I am all alone in the great house, sir. Will you come with me? It will give me great pleasure.”

“ After I have eaten I will go to the house, if it will do you so much good. You may tell me how to find it.”

“ Ah, sir, if you would but come with me now and let me prepare supper for you, just as I would do for my master. You are so like him, that I will feel that I am doing it for him. It will make me very glad. You will come? ”

Ashton thought a moment.

“ Yes, if it will please you so much to deceive yourself, and you are sure that there are not others there.”

“ There is only one other person, sir, and she never leaves her room.”

“ Very well. If I can do anybody any good, it will be a pleasant diversion.”

Ashton raised one hand in signal to a hansom and motioned for Robert to enter.

50 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

"Shall I ride with you, sir?" he asked, hesitatingly.

"By all means. Tell cabby where to take us, and get inside."

Robert was so overjoyed by the success of his efforts that he could scarcely speak and his voice trembled when he gave the address to the driver; but they were soon on their way, and in a very short time were set down at the door of the house to which the young earl had taken his happy bride, one year ago that very day.

"Wait, sir," said Robert, suddenly, remembering that the countess might be at the window, and recognize his companion as he had done. The shock might kill her, or upset her reason, and it must be avoided. "We will drive to the side door, if you do not mind."

"Anything, Robert; anywhere. It makes no difference to me."

"Shall I take you to the small living room, sir, where I pass most of my time, or would you prefer to go to the library?" asked Robert as they entered the house.

"As you please, Robert."

"Yes, sir. This way, then, if you please. It is pleasant in here. I am very fond of this room, for it was once my master's playroom. Will you take that chair? We won't try to talk yet, sir,

until I have prepared some supper for you. Your presence makes me very happy, sir; more happy than I have been for a year; happier than I ever was in my life, I think. Oh, Jack, Jack, my boy Jack, don't you know me yet? "

Ashton raised his eyes half angrily, but he saw that tears were running down the old man's cheeks, and he did not reply. Then Robert turned and left the room.

CHAPTER IV

THE STORY — ROBERT'S DELUSION

WHEN Robert returned, he had recovered the imperturbable calmness for which English servants are renowned. He actually hummed a favourite air to himself while he was engaged in setting the table; and Ashton watched him curiously, vaguely wishing himself indeed the lost earl, returned to enjoy his own and to be waited upon by such a servant.

Once, when Robert was absent from the room for a longer period than usual, he returned bearing a smoking-jacket and a pair of slippers, and without a word knelt down and began to undo the laces of Ashton's dust covered shoes.

"You might as well be comfortable, sir," he said, when his guest demurred. "I was on the point of saying that you used to like to wear these slippers and this jacket when we were here together in this way, and in this very room. You are so like the earl, sir, that I forget that you are not actually he. You will pardon me, sir, if I

“speak in that way sometimes? It does me good just to think that you are he. He was almost like my own boy, you know, sir, and I loved him just the same. You won't mind if I keep on thinking that you are the earl, if the thought gives me so much pleasure, will you?”

“No, Robert; it can do no harm, I suppose; still, it seems to me to be a strange sort of pleasure. You will find that the slippers will not fit me, and that will disabuse your mind of this conceit.”

“Oh, they will fit you, sir, never fear. They used to fit perfectly, you know, and I do not believe that your feet have grown. There, am I not right, sir?”

“I can't deny it, Robert. It is all very strange.”

“Yes, sir; very strange; so it is, but the strangeness will wear off after awhile.”

When the cold tongue, fresh bread, steaming chocolate, the inevitable pot of marmalade and a profusion of delicacies were placed upon the table, Robert took his place behind the chair he had arranged for Ashton, and bade him to the repast.

“You will sup with me, Robert,” he said, as he took the proffered seat.

“Yes, sir, after I have waited upon you. You will not mind if I prefer to do things just as I

54 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

used to do them, before you went — that is before he went away? ”

“ No; please yourself, if you get any pleasure out of it.”

“ Thank you, sir. Why, I feel ten years younger than I did before I met you at the top of St. James street.”

“ Robert, are you sure that you are in your right mind? Try to think, now, and see if you are not labouring under some vivid hallucination. This is all so confoundedly preposterous, and you are in such deadly earnest, that by Jove, I begin to think that perhaps I am the earl after all, and that I have been living in a dream for thirty years or more.”

“ Thirty-one, sir. Thirty-one last February.”

“ Eh? By Jove, that's funny. How the devil did you know my age? ”

“ I held you in my arms before you were a day old, sir.”

“ Well, upon my soul, Robert, I believe that you are as crazy as a loon. I suspected it when you first addressed me, but your earnestness compelled me to believe you sincere.”

“ No, sir, I am in my right mind. Don't think about that at all. You were thirty-one on the tenth day of last February. Isn't that true? ”

“ Humph! Not quite, Robert. You are two

days off, for my birthday happens on the twelfth. At least," he added with suddenly clouded brow, "that is the date I have always celebrated. Look here, Robert, are you sure that your master is not dead, and that the loss of one you loved so dearly sort of queered you,—eh?"

"Well, sir, if he had died, I think I should have died, too. I won't deny that."

"Have you got a photograph of him?"

"Yes, sir. Here it is, and a perfect likeness, too. It was taken just a week before you went away."

"The devil it was! Eh? Is that the earl?"

"Yes, sir. Go to the mirror, sir, and look upon the picture and then at yourself. What do you think of it?"

"I think, if this is a likeness of the earl, I don't blame you. It could not have been more like me if I had sat for it myself."

"That it could not, sir; that's the truth. Now, if you will sit here in this chair, I will bring you one of your favourite cigars. They are all the better for being a year older," and the old man hastened to fetch the cigars.

When Ashton had lighted the cigar, he smoked on in silence for several moments while Robert stood faithfully beside him, devouring him with his eyes, stroking the backs of his own hands

56 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

softly, his whole attitude one of devotion, almost rapture.

Presently Ashton burst into a hearty laugh — the first time in a year that he had laughed aloud — and the sound, emanating from himself, was strange to him, and it ceased as abruptly as it began.

"What is it? What is the matter?" asked Robert.

"Suppose the earl were to walk in here now, and find me arrayed in his smoking jacket, wearing his slippers and smoking his cigars. What do you think he would do, Robert?"

"He would sit right down here and smoke with you, sir, and say it was an excellent joke. I am sure that he would, sir."

"Well, perhaps he would, but I am not half so sure of it as you are. How long has he been away?"

"He left the house one year ago to-night, sir."

"Humph! And I left my home one year ago to-night, too."

"Yes, sir; certainly. Of course you did. Don't you remember, there was a wed — ahem! a sort of party here, sir? A lot of your old friends, and the Prince and Princess of Wales and —"

"Hold on, Robert. Great Scott, man! What

are you talking about? I think I know what is the matter. The party you refer to was a funeral, eh? And the earl was dead? Now stop and think if I am not right."

"You see, sir" — calmly — "you cannot be correct, because if that were true, there would be another earl here now. If he had died as you say, the next in line would have inherited the title and the estates. You understand that, do you not, sir?"

"Yes, to be sure. Decidedly, this is the most remarkable circumstance, take it all through, that I ever heard of. Now you get that chair and put it there. That's right. Sit down upon it, and tell me the story of the disappearance of the earl, from beginning to end. Perhaps we can get something out of it; at all events, we'll try. While you are telling it, I want you to observe one thing."

"Certainly, my lord."

"Bosh! You carry this farce too far. I want you to remember that you are speaking of the earl and not of me. Have you exhausted every effort to find him?"

"I have searched everywhere, sir."

"Did you notify the police?"

"No, sir, the countess would not have it so. She preferred —"

58 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

"The countess! Good Heavens! Was he married?"

"Yes, sir; the ceremony —"

"Stop!"

Ashton leaped to his feet, kicked off the slippers and threw off the jacket before Robert realized what he was doing.

"Where is the countess now?" he demanded.

"Here in this house? Good God, Robert, you don't suppose I want to be caught here under these circumstances, do you? Where is my hat?"

"Please wait, sir. Let me help you on with this jacket again. The countess is not here. She is abroad, sir. She has been abroad a year. There is no one in the house but ourselves."

"And a woman. You spoke about a woman. Who is she?"

"A servant, sir."

"Where is she?"

"In her own room, sir. She is an invalid, and never leaves it. There, that is better. Now the slippers; so, and so; and your cigar? You threw it away and you must have a fresh one. Now, shall I tell you the story?"

"Yes. I'll play the earl for a little while and listen to you. You gave me quite a start, though."

Ashton had permitted himself to be gently

thrust back into the chair, and so, rejacketed and reslippered, he resumed his former position.

"Where shall I begin, sir?" asked Robert.

"At the wedding ceremony?"

"Yes, if that is the proper place."

"Do you remember, sir, how beautiful Lady Mercy looked that morning?" asked Robert, musingly, for his mind had leaped back over the year and the spectacle of that day was passing in review before him. He saw again the increasing dawn; heard again the twitter of birds; felt once more the pleasure of that early morning wedding; but he was rudely awakened from his dream by the voice of Ashton, calmly inquiring:

"Who is Lady Mercy? The countess?"

Robert's emotions were too greatly magnified to admit of expression. He could only stare at Ashton in melancholy and pathetic silence, for he did not know what to say.

He had thought that a delicate reference to Lady Mercy might recall something of the rare beauty of her face and character to the mind of his guest—that it might rekindle the spark of memory which he firmly believed was smoldering underneath a mass of forgetfulness so dense that only time, patience and constant reference to things of the past could remove it. There was

60 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

not in his mind a single doubt that the rightful earl was in his presence, enjoying his own.

He believed with the same sincerity that he worshipped God, that the earl had met with some accident which had stolen his memory, and that constant association with things of the past would gradually restore it; but he was in terror lest he should say something that would again start him away, and the problem that he had to face, and which at that moment seemed to him to be the most vital, was how to keep the earl there in his own home, under his watchful care, until recollection returned, and he should again become master of his faculties.

While preparing the supper, he had the forethought to go to the apartments of the countess and tell her that he had company in his own room, and that he would return to her when his guest had departed, for he had not dared to run the risk of telling her who he believed that guest to be until he had studied the situation thoroughly, and was prepared to act for each of them. Now, his one thought was, how to bring the countess and the earl together, for down deep in his faithful heart he was convinced that such a meeting would be the final solution of all the difficulties; but he loved his mistress too well to run the risk of introducing the earl into her

presence until he was sure that he would recognize her. When at last he responded to the question that Ashton asked, it was to say, calmly:

"Yes, Lady Mercy is the countess. Would you like to see her picture?"

"Surely, if you have one here."

"I have one that was taken at the same time as yours — the earl's, I mean. Here it is. Tell me if you have any recollection of the face."

He gave the photograph into Ashton's hands, and the latter took it and held it face downward while without severity, but in sincere earnestness, he said, slowly:

"Robert, I cannot permit you to continue this farce of associating me with the earl. It is not good for you. Understand once for all that I am not the earl, that I never heard of him until I met you to-day, that I never saw this house or this room before and that I will not be a party to any such deception or attempt at deception. At first it amused me, then it interested me, but now it is taking a serious turn, and I cannot permit it to continue. If there were no countess, I might be disposed to humour you; but as it is, it is not to be thought of for an instant. Unless you will promise me to drop the idea utterly, and not to refer to it again, I must withdraw my offer to assist you, and leave this place at once.

62 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

Do you understand that I mean what I say? "

" Yes, sir. I beg your pardon. I will endeavour not to offend again. Now will you look at the picture of the countess? "

" She is very beautiful. There is strength and power as well as beauty in the face, too. Did they love each other, Robert? "

" Yes, they loved as few people in this world love."

Poor Robert. He was torn by a thousand conflicting emotions. He had expected that there would be some faint spark of recognition in the mind of his guest when his eyes should fall upon that portrait, but there was none. He looked eagerly, with hunger in his eyes and heart, for such a sign, but he saw none, and there shot through him something like despair at the magnitude of the task before him.

If he only dared to consult a physician; but that was not to be thought of, for it would displease the countess. No, there was only one way and he sighed as he thought of it. He must watch and wait, with patience, perseverance and love. Love would conquer in the end. He felt assured of that. If he were debarred from referring to his guest as the master of the house, and treating him as such, there was still one

course left open to him, and that was, constantly to bring the supposed earl in contact with reminiscences and things of the past, and thus gradually to revive his recollection.

Something — he did not know what, but he thoroughly believed that there was something, somewhere, which, if his lord were brought in sudden contact with it, would fan that smouldering spark of memory into a blaze which would burn away the obstructions over which he now found it impossible to see. Robert honestly believed that he was constituted the special agent of the Almighty for the purpose of administering draughts of reminiscence to his master, and that ultimately he would succeed in restoring health and strength to the mind that was now wandering through an unknown realm. If it was necessary at first to give the medicine in small doses, and without the consciousness of the patient, the nurse must be patient and steadfast; and he prayed for strength, endurance, humility and knowledge to fulfil his mission.

But there was another, and, in some respects, a greater responsibility upon him: the countess.

It was vitally necessary that something should be said to her; but what? He had already told her that he had a guest below, who was awaiting him, and that was an unprecedented event in itself.

64 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

During the year that had passed he had never once admitted a stranger to the house; how, therefore, should he now have a guest? And having one, who was he? How account for his presence without revealing all that he believed to be the truth.

The countess, naturally, would require an explanation; or rather, she would expect one. Robert felt that he would rather defy a regiment of interrogation points than to face the battery of her great eyes. How should he reply to their unvoiced questions? He almost forgot the importance of the conditions immediately surrounding him, in contemplation of this new perplexity. Should he tell her the truth?

In all his life, Robert had never lied for himself. He had lied for others, time and time again; but never for himself, and he did not know how. His mind was too primitive and too honest to permit him deliberately to tell her what he knew to be an untruth regarding the most vital circumstance in her life; and yet to tell her what he honestly believed he absolutely knew to be the unvarnished fact, might prostrate her; might be her undoing, and might — and he feared that it would — destroy the chances that God had vouchsafed him, for the reclamation of his lost master.

In the meantime, Ashton had become impatient for a continuation of the story that Robert had promised to tell him. His own history had made him cynical; his experiences during the year just passed had rendered him incredulous of all things; but he was a man born with a natural love for his fellow man; it was his nature to recognize virtues at the same time that he blinded himself to vices; he loved to overlook a great fault, if by so doing he could discover an insignificant good intention, and during the hour that had passed since he entered the house of the earl, he had come to the conclusion that Robert was unqualifiedly mad. Harmlessly so, perhaps, but thoroughly insane. A monomaniac, utterly daft on the one subject, while remaining entirely rational concerning everything else; and, that being the case, it was very much better to humour him to the utmost.

"Come, Robert," he said at last, "tell me about that wedding, and what followed it;" and Robert, thoroughly sincere, but still under the influence of his thoughts, replied:

"Yes, my lord."

CHAPTER V

ROBERT'S DELUSION — A FUTILE HOPE

THERE was nothing forgotten or neglected in the story that Robert told. He began at the time when the earl was a boy and related everything that could, in his belief, serve to reënlighen the recollection of his auditor.

He referred to the young man's chums at Eton and Oxford, mentioning the names of many of them; he even told of the childhood playfellowship between Mercy Covington and the Viscount, of their long separation, and their subsequent meeting. He related, graphically, how they became engaged, and he told of the wedding in detail, even describing the flowers and mentioning the names of guests whose personality had been dear to the earl. He told of the early morning ceremony, recalled the glory of that dawning day, the songs of the birds, and the harmony and peace of the entire scene.

Then, bit by bit, he went through the day of

reception, forgetting nothing, even to the most trivial detail, and dwelling at considerable length upon the message that was brought to him, and which he in turn delivered to the earl: "Tell him that his friend Tom must see him at once; he will understand."

He told how he had given his master's hat to him, and watched him when he left the house, and how he had waited at the door for the earl's return, until the peremptory summons from the countess called him from his post.

During the recital his eyes never once left the face of his guest. He watched Ashton as the proverbial cat watches the unregenerate mouse, endeavouring by his words to recall a sign of recognition of the circumstances described. But there was a chill at his heart when he realized his utter failure, for there was not a suggestion of responsiveness upon the face of the man who listened.

Robert sighed resignedly, with the mental reservation that he must be patient and wait; and then he plunged into the subsequent happenings, withholding only the fact that the countess had remained in the home of her husband while they were supposed to be travelling abroad, and that she was still there, virtually a prisoner, awaiting the return of the man she

68 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

loved, and still strong in the confidence that he would one day come back to her.

When at last the story was told, when even Robert felt that there was nothing left to relate, Ashton, who had permitted his cigar to go out, relighted it, and leaning back in his chair, said coolly:

"Robert, the earl is dead."

"Dead!" cried Robert. "No, sir, I do not believe it."

"He is dead. Nothing short of death could have kept him all this time away from" — he hesitated and raised the photograph of the countess until he held it before his eyes — "such a bride as that. He is dead, or he would have come back before this."

"It may be, sir, it may be; but I cannot believe it," said Robert.

"Jealousy killed him. The fact that he was called away from his bride even before he had a chance to touch her lips with his, proves that. Nothing short of the hate of a woman could have been as relentless as that. We will give up the search for the earl, even before we begin it, Robert."

"Yes, sir, if you think best."

"And I will assist you to find his murderer."

"Yes, sir; and even if his soul — that is, his memory, has fled, we will find his body."

"Humph! That is a year old now, and you had better let it lie; but we will find out what became of it."

"That is what I mean, sir. If we can find out positively what became of his body, that is all I ask; and if you will promise to assist me, I shall feel that success is almost within my grasp. You see, sir" — and Robert's face became pitiful in the anxiety he expressed, lest he should again say the wrong thing at the wrong time — "besides the countess and myself, you are the only person in the world who knows that the earl ever disappeared, and I need the advice and assistance of a man like yourself; I do not know how to act, alone, for, after all, sir, I am only a servant. Then, by and by" — there was marked hesitation in the old man's speech now — "after you have got things more thoroughly in your grasp, perhaps I can induce you to meet the countess and talk with her. You can understand how isolated she feels, with nobody in the whole world to turn to — that is, nobody but me, and I am nobody in a matter of this kind. It is all very sad, sir, for she looks to me for everything, and I — well, I am not competent to do all that should

70 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

be done, sir, or to advise upon any subject out of my own sphere."

Ashton remained silent for several moments after Robert ceased speaking. He was quietly puffing at his cigar and watching the smoke as it curled and eddied the frescoed ceiling. For the first time in a whole year, he had found something to interest him sufficiently to take his mind from himself, and it was invigorating.

The photograph of the countess was still in his possession, and he raised it several times, and studied the features of Lady Mercy. The face attracted him, interested him. It seemed to appeal to him to give all the assistance he could to this faithful old servant whose life and soul were bound up in devotion to her and the missing earl.

All the time that he was thinking and studying the pictured face of the countess, he was himself the subject of scrutinizing observation. Robert's eyes never left him. They glowed with anticipation every time he realized that the thoughts of his guest were fixed upon the countess. He believed that the earl felt the thrill of something long forgotten and but dimly suggested to his memory by the photograph of the woman he had loved.

"Suppose, Robert," said Ashton, after he had

thought out what he considered best to do, "suppose that the countess should feel that you have taken a great liberty in revealing to an entire stranger the secret that she has guarded so jealously; suppose that she should reprimand you for it — what then? "

"I know that she will not take it that way, sir."

"Possibly not, but women are apt to view things differently from men. I can understand why you should feel towards me as you do; it is the likeness that I bear to the earl, but that very fact will probably be offensive to her."

"Yes, sir, that is it; and it is something more than that, too," referring to the first part of Ashton's remarks, "you not only look like him, sir, but you *are* like him — in everything, and that is why I know that you are good and noble and that I ought to confide in you and ask your help. And as for the countess taking offence because you are like his lordship — it isn't to be thought of, sir."

"Has she no father, or brothers, or somebody more appropriate than I, to whom she could appeal? "

"No, sir. She is an orphan. She had one brother, but he died in India, several years ago."

72 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

"Then some near friend of her father's or brother's, or an old chum of the earl's would be better."

"There is nobody, sir, in whom she is willing to confide."

"It is a pity. It seems to me, Robert, that there is a duty to be performed in this matter."

"Yes, sir; what is it?"

"Who succeeds to the title in the event of your master's death?"

"A cousin."

"What is his name? Where does he live? Who and what is he? In short, tell me all about him."

"Well, sir, I don't rightly know where he is now; I don't think anybody does know, for he has not been in London for nearly five years."

"What is his name?"

"His name is Hertford. Perhaps, sir, you may remember to have heard the name somewhere before."

Poor Robert dwelt lingeringly upon the last sentence, hoping against hope that there would be some start of recognition in the face of his auditor; hoping that the name would revive a spark of memory, would touch a long disused, untuned chord in the recollection of his guest; but there was nothing. Ashton did not even

remove the cigar from his lips nor alter his attitude by the diameter of a hair.

"No," he said meditatively, "I do not remember to have heard it before;" and Robert breathed a sigh of intense disappointment.

"What is his given name?"

"His full name is Richard Herndon Hertford, sir. His mother was a Herndon — Lady Grace; surely you must remember her, for —"

"Robert!"

Ashton spoke sharply, at the same time casting his half smoked cigar from him and rising from his chair.

"I have warned you several times that you must not continue this farce of persistently confounding my identity with that of your missing master. It is a harmless deceit, perhaps, except so far as you are personally concerned, but it is not good for you, and it must not continue, unless you want me to go away and leave you, for I will not remain and listen to that sort of twaddle. I realize that you are in great distress over his disappearance, and I am willing to help you in any way I can, but there must be no more of that sort of thing; I will not have it. I am not the missing earl; I am not John Hertford; I am not even an Englishman. You should be aware of that from my manner of speaking."

74 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

"Yes, sir; yes, sir. Pardon me, pray pardon me! I forget, you know. You are so like him, and when I see you sitting there, looking just as he looked, speaking with his voice, looking at me with his eyes —"

"Smoking his cigars and wearing his jacket and slippers —"

"Yes, sir, perhaps that has something to do with it, too — I forget myself. I am not as young as I once was, sir. May I — would you mind, sir, if I should sometimes address you as Mr. John? You see, that is your name, sir, and it was his name, too. Perhaps if I could do that, I would be less likely to offend you in the other way, and it would humour the whim of an old man. Would you mind it very much, sir?"

"Not in the least, Robert. Call me Mr. John as much as you like, or Jack, if it pleases you better. It should be an honour to any man to be on terms of familiarity with as true and honest a heart as yours. I wish from the depths of my soul that I were the missing earl, returned to be cared for and coddled by such a faithful old servant. But I am not, and I won't be milorded any more."

"Thank you — thank you, Mr. John." Robert uttered the name that he was permitted to use, with a lingering enunciation impossible to describe.

It dwelt on his tongue like a delectable morsel, too rare to be hastily parted with. "You will resume your seat now, sir? Thank you — thank you! Now let me give you a glass of this sherry and a fresh cigar. There! You gave me such a start when you got up so suddenly, and I knew that I had offended again. It is very kind of you to put up with the mistakes that I am constantly making. We were speaking of the Honourable Mr. Richard Hertford, I believe, and I had just mentioned Lady Grace, his mother."

"Yes."

"Lady Grace was called the most beautiful woman in England in her time. It is ten years since she died. Mr. Richard's father was General Hertford. He was killed in India, shortly before Lady Grace passed away. He was first cousin to the late earl, my lord's father, so you see, sir —"

"Spare me the family history, Robert, and come down to Richard Hertford. How old a man is he, and where is he likely to be found now?"

"Well, sir, he is something more than ten years your senior — I remember that it is another coincidence that you are the same age as the earl — and he is a great traveller, seldom remaining in England more than a few weeks at a time. He possesses a private fortune which is

76 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

much more than sufficient for his needs, for I know that he does not use half his income. I believe that at the present time he is somewhere in South America."

"Were Richard Hertford and the earl friends?"

"The very best of friends, sir."

"Well, Robert, it is my opinion that an effort should be made to communicate with Richard Hertford at once. He is the proper person to assist you and the countess in the search for the missing earl, and he is the one who is entitled to the title and estates if, as I believe, the earl is dead. His bankers doubtless know where to find him."

"I think they would, sir."

"Then it is your duty to call upon them at once."

"Very well, my — sir, I will do so, but it is only with the consent of Lady Mercy that I can promise to communicate with him."

"Certainly. And now, Robert, it is long past midnight and I must go."

"Surely, sir, you are not going away to-night!" cried Robert, aghast at the mere thought, for until that instant it had not occurred to him that his guest had any idea of not remaining in the house over night.

"What the devil do you expect me to do? Sleep here?" demanded Ashton, in surprise.

"Most certainly, sir. You came here at my request, as a favour to me. It is very late and there is not a cab stand nearer than a mile. I can provide you with every comfort, so that you will not miss your luggage at all. I shall take it quite unkindly, Mr. John, if you insist upon going away to-night, and" — with insinuating deference — "the earl would be deeply incensed if he should return and discover that I had permitted you to do so. You will remain, sir?"

John Ashton leaned back in the chair from which he had partially risen, and laughed softly, for he was intensely amused by the absurdity of the situation. There could be no harm in remaining as the guest of the old and trusted servant, and he saw that Robert was genuinely pained by the suggestion of his going away.

Had he known that the countess was in the house, he would not for one instant have considered the idea of remaining, but he had been assured that there was only one other person besides Robert and himself beneath the roof, and that person was doubtless the housekeeper — another old and tried dependent, like the one before him. There was, also, a spice of adventure about the affair, which fascinated him. He had

78 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

permitted the circumstance to direct his thoughts and actions for so long a time, that he now had little inclination to resist its influence. And again, the mere fact that the incident had forced the ghost of a laugh from his sombre soul was sufficient inducement of itself. He decided to humour the old man still more, and stay.

"Very well, Robert," he said, laughing again. "I will don the Earl of Ashton's pajamas and I will sleep in the Earl of Cowingford's bed, since you seem to wish it so earnestly; only find them both without delay, for I am very tired and your old sherry has made me sleepy. By morning, doubtless, you will see things differently, or at least more clearly, and perhaps, under the circumstances, it is my duty to remain."

"Yes, sir; most decidedly it is. Will you excuse me while I prepare the room? Ah, sir, it will make me very happy to know that you are sleeping under this roof to-night — very happy indeed, very, very happy."

He left the room with all haste, as though he feared, if he hesitated, his guest might change his mind, and yet insist upon departing.

When Ashton was alone, the incidents of the present moment were speedily forgotten in the anguish of that past from which he could not escape. The novelty of the scene with Robert

had provided the first opportunity of immunity from it that had been permitted him during all that long and almost endless year, and of all the days that it had contained the one just passed had been the bitterest and most drear.

The very moment that found him alone again with his own thoughts, however, reinvoked the spectres that haunted him by day, that dwelt with him by night, that travelled before, behind and on either side of him, wheresoever he went — the ghosts of memory, of regret and of despair. He forgot that there had ever been such a personage as this John Makepeace Hertford, the Earl of Ashton and Cowingford; he forgot that there was a countess, that there was a Robert, and that he was at that moment strangely and inexplicably installed in the residence of a peer of England, an unbidden if not an unwelcome guest. Memory conjured up before him the wraith of Hope Hollister as she had appeared at that terrible moment when he had bidden her good by for ever; regret leered at him across the chasm that his own act had dug between them before that last meeting, and jeered at him from the grave of Hope's father, filled, as he believed, by his own impetuous act; despair gnawed at his vitals and seared his heart with the hot irons of inquisitory reproof, and there was no joy in him.

80 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

When Robert departed from the room, it was as if he had carried the light with him, and so left Ashton in total darkness, and he sat there, plunged in blackness, with his head bowed upon his hands, again utterly and desolately alone.

The man who finds himself alone in body, momentarily bereft of association with his kind, experiences a pang of discomfort which is half resentment, but which finds solace in the resolve to return to and live again with the associations of the past; the man who is alone in soul, who has cut himself adrift from everything that is past, who feels that his solitude is greatest when surging humanity jostles him the hardest, is benumbed. He suffers as dumb brutes suffer, silently; he lives as the leper lives, miserably; and he dies as martyrs have died, gladly.

The day at Greenwich with its whitebait and jugglers and all that had succeeded it, faded from view. Only the man remained; only the solitary man.

Great men, like lofty mountains, are solitary because they tower so high; but they are surrounded by brightness and the world is at their feet. Men like John Ashton are unexplored caverns in the earth, and they are solitary because they have dived so deep; it is the blackness of

despair and the darkness of desolation which surrounds them. The former is the harvest, marking the fruition of accomplished ambition; the latter is the reaping of the crop of renunciation.

It would have been difficult if not quite impossible for a psychologist to have defined the condition of John Ashton's mind. His grief was not of the poignant kind which groans in anguish and conjures up pictures of the past to reasonize remorse that has become partially benumbed. Such grief had never been his, or if it had, it had only touched him with spasmodic dashes here and there, during the year that had passed. Such grief comes only to him who has remaining some glimmer of hope for the future, even though it be distant and indistinct. With John Ashton, hope was dead, and with it had died all things of this world, leaving only him alive.

He would have gone to a dungeon with the same indifference that he consented to sleep in a peer's bed; he would have accepted a king's sceptre with the same lack of appreciation with which he had swallowed the earl's sherry. His soul was engulfed in a condition which may be paradoxically described as intense indifference—a condition more to be dreaded than the utmost agony that the physical being can suffer—

82 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

a condition more alarming than premeditated crime with its results.

He did not hear Robert when the faithful old man reëntered the room and was not aware of his presence until he felt a light touch upon one of the hands that covered his face, and looked up quickly to perceive that the old servant was on one knee beside him, gazing anxiously into his burning eyes.

"My lord, what is it? Are you suffering? Have I been gone too long?" he exclaimed.

"No, no! It is nothing, Robert, nothing. I was dreaming, that is all; dreaming dreams. Ah, Robert, you are the first of my kind who has succeeded in calling me back to my own self for a whole year, and it did me good, even though I lapsed into my dreams again the moment you left me. Perhaps if you will love me a little for the sake of that lost master of yours whom I so much resemble, I will not dream so often. Ho, ho, Robert! You have made me sentimental, like your old self; eh? Still I am in earnest — in deadly earnest."

It appeared for a moment as if Robert was about to embrace him then and there, but he controlled the desire with a visible effort.

"Ah, sir," he said, brokenly, "if you will let me love you for his sake I will try to be content.

Come, now, your room is prepared; I will conduct you to it at once. You are very tired. Come, sir, you may have forgotten the way, but I will show it to you "

CHAPTER VI

A COLLAPSE AND A CONFESSION

ROBERT conducted John Ashton to the room that he had prepared for him, and having seen that everything was arranged to his satisfaction, bestowing a lingering touch here and there, he at last, with marked hesitation and a wistful glance at his guest, turned to leave the apartment.

"I will bring your coffee to you in the morning, just as I used to — just as I used to take it to him," he said.

"Very well, Robert, I will sleep till you awaken me, then. Was this the earl's room?"

"Yes, sir. He always preferred it to any other in this house; but he did not remain much in London; he preferred the quiet of Hertford Hall."

"Hertford Hall? Where is that?"

"It is the family seat, sir, in Hertfordshire. Is there anything more that I can do for you, Mr. John?"

"Nothing, Robert, thank you. Good night."

"Good night, sir, and God bless you. Good night."

He passed out silently and closed the door behind him, leaving Ashton standing in the middle of the room, fast lapsing again into that dreamy state which was inevitable with him whenever he was alone. It did not, however, return with its accustomed monopolizing power, and there was a half smile upon his face as he surveyed the room in which he was, by a curious complication of conditions, at once master and guest. And finally with a shrug of his broad shoulders, he began his preparations for the night.

If he could have followed the faithful servant when he returned to the room where the interview had taken place, he would have been amazed, for no sooner had Robert entered it than he locked the door and then dropped upon his knees and sobbed aloud. His kind old face was buried in his folded arms, where they rested upon the chair that Ashton had occupied while he smoked the earl's cigars and drank his lordship's sherry.

The old man remained thus for many minutes, praying silently. Only God and himself knew what passed between them during that half hour through which he never raised his head nor moved, except as his body trembled with the emotions within him; but at last he arose, and

86 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

wiping the moisture from his eyes, forced back into his possession that placid, imperturbable, expressionless countenance which belongs in fee simple to the well trained English servant.

He regarded himself critically in the mirror, and at last satisfied, he left the room and made his way along the corridor to the front of the house, thence up the steps to the second floor, and paused finally before a door upon which he softly and gently tapped with the ends of his fingers.

It was opened almost instantly, as though the summons had been anxiously and impatiently expected, and Robert crossed the threshold, more perturbed in mind and body than he remembered ever to have been before.

"It is very late, my lady," he murmured apologetically. "My guest detained me longer than I anticipated. I thought that perhaps you had retired."

"And you wished it also, Robert? Is that what your words mean?"

"Yes, my lady. It was thoughtless in me to say that I would return after my — my friend had gone;" and Robert turned his eyes away from the clear, searching gaze that was bent upon him.

He had decided that it would be best to deceive his mistress regarding what he believed to be the

truth, until he could feel the ground more securely beneath him. He believed that it would be best to temporize for the present, until he could study more thoroughly the unfortunate malady from which his master, the earl, was suffering; but he had underestimated the clear perceptions of his mistress; he had forgotten that during the year she had learned to read his impassive face as clearly as though his thoughts had been written there in illumined type.

"Who is your guest, Robert? Who is your — your friend?" she inquired, imitating with the faintest touch of satire his hesitation over that last word, and at the same time resuming the chair from which she had risen to admit him.

The old man hung his head, dismayed and speechless. He had entered the room firm in the belief that he could deceive the countess, but at the threshold he encountered two obstacles, either of which was sufficient to render utterly impotent any deception that he might attempt to practise.

He realized the moment when she asked these questions that he had not the power to lie to her, and moreover, that if the power had been given to him then and there, she would have penetrated the veil of falsehood and demanded the truth. His love for the countess is difficult to analyze and can be comprehended only by those

88 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

who have been blessed by such a devotion, or who have, like Robert, bestowed it upon another.

She was at once his daughter and his mistress, his child and his mother, his charge and his religion. He was her dependent and yet she was utterly dependent upon him. He filled the place of father, mother, servant, counsellor and friend, and in all these relations she possessed a twofold claim upon him, for in addition to her own personality, she was the wife of his idol, and she had been left to him as a sacred trust and care.

For the first time in his life, he did not know in what words to reply to her. If he had dared to raise his eyes to hers he would have seen that his hesitation had sent a sudden wave of colour to her face, to be succeeded the next instant by a death-like pallor. Her eyes dilated and the pupils became distended with suppressed excitement, and her hands tightened their grasp upon the arms of the chair in which she was seated. Otherwise she gave no outward sign of the tempest of impatience and expectancy that was raging within her.

Throughout an entire year she had risen every morning with the confident expectation that the day would bring the earl back to her, and she had retired every night with a prayer upon her lips that ere the hours of darkness had passed,

she would be summoned from her sleep to welcome him home.

With her the expectation of his return had been more than hope; it had been certainty. There had never been a moment when she had given away to actual despair, and it was that mental certainty of his home-coming that had kept her alive, that had preserved her beauty and maintained her health.

She and Robert had been of one mind in this respect. They had hoped alike, thought alike, prayed alike, believed alike. Their perceptions had focused at the same point, and each time that he had returned from his daily wanderings in search of his master, there had been little need of conversation between them, for his face inevitably told her all that his tongue could have uttered.

Never until to-night had a stranger been admitted within the house. Never until to-night had Robert broken from his habit of passing an interval of time with her, between the hours of darkness and retiring. Never until to-night had he manifested the slightest reluctance or hesitation in replying to any question of hers; and now there had been, or was, a stranger in the house — a guest — a friend!

The countess knew that something quite un-

90 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

usual had happened; she realized that Robert hesitated to confide in her, and although she saw traces of tears in his eyes, her delicate intuition told her that they had been tears of happiness rather than of sorrow; it told her that it was joy and not grief that he was withholding from her.

It is a paradox of the human organism, that an expectant soul can await the advent of joy with much more fortitude and patience than it can withstand the silent approach of grief. If Robert had good news to impart, she could await his own pleasure, and the moments thus passed would give her the opportunity which she felt was quite necessary, to prepare herself for the announcement when it came.

Heaven and earth could hold but one joy for her now, and hence it was that she believed she could await with calmness the certain happiness which Robert had brought to her and which he hesitated to give, fearful of the effect that its too sudden development might have upon her. She could wait — she had waited a whole year — and while she still waited, she resolved, with heroic strength, to prepare herself.

“Who was your guest, Robert?” she inquired again, presently, uttering the question softly.

Still he did not reply. He could not lie to her; he dared not tell her the truth.

"Has your guest departed?" she continued, after another pause.

"No," replied Robert, slowly. "He is still here."

"Still here? Still in this house?" she demanded quickly, in great astonishment.

"Yes, my lady."

"Where is he?"

"He has retired."

"Retired?"

The countess gazed at Robert in wide-eyed amazement. She bent forward towards him and for a full minute remained silent, and then in a voice which had sunk almost to a whisper, yet which was distinctly audible, she murmured:

"Robert, tell me the name of your guest."

The old servant raised his head at last and fixed his great pathetic eyes upon the face of the countess; and while he gazed at her thus, she saw two tears spring unbidden to his cheeks and roll silently downward; otherwise the expression of his face did not change; and he did not reply.

"Robert, tell me the name of your guest," the countess said again, speaking the words automatically, in the same low tone, without emphasis, almost without expression.

"His name, my lady, is John Ashton."

She did not move; for a moment it seemed as

92 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

if she did not breathe. Her hands still grasped the arms of the chair; her eyes were still fixed upon the face of her servant, but they seemed to gaze through and beyond him, not at him. Her attitude was as though she had not heard the words he had uttered, or if she had heard them, did not understand. At last she sighed, and with that sigh all the rigidity left her, and she sank back into the depths of the chair. Presently she spoke again.

"We will both be calm, Robert," she said, "and presently you will find the courage to tell me all there is to tell. Did you meet him on the street while you were out in the early part of the evening?"

"Yes, my lady."

"And he — was — an old friend of yours, Robert?"

"Yes, my lady."

"Did you address him first, or — or did he speak to you?"

"He did not see me until I spoke to him, my lady."

"And then —"

"Yes, my lady."

"What then, Robert?"

"He — did — not know — old Robert! He — didn't know — me!"

The words came out in sobbing gasps, and the old man leaned his arms upon the mantel and buried his tear-stained face between them. He could not utter another word, then. All the pent-up emotions of interminable hours burst their bounds at last, and he no longer endeavoured to restrain them. He had borne the burden to the point of falling beneath it, and he could sustain it no longer.

The countess sprang to her feet the instant that he gave way. The paralyzing effect of the announcement not yet half made, yet wholly understood, vanished the instant she realized that the faithful old man had given way, and that it devolved upon her to sustain him.

She hastened to his side, and with her arms around him led him gently to the chair she had occupied. Then, when he was seated, she sank upon one knee beside him while with tender force she pulled his hands from his face and held them in her own.

"Dear Robert!" she murmured. "Dear, dear Robert. It has been very hard for you — very, very hard, and through it all you have been so brave and good and gentle. Hush! Hush, Robert. You must not give way like this. Really, you must not, Robert. It is nothing very dreadful, is it, Robert, except that he has

94 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

forgotten? He — he is not — not ill, or wounded?"

The old man tried to speak, but he could not. He could only shake his head in silent negation. The countess patted his hands and rubbed them, waiting with an eagerness that was maddening, for Robert to recover himself sufficiently to be able to speak. It was as though he were a little child who had been discovered in an act of wrong doing, and, having been chided for it, is overcome by the emotion which all must feel when forgiveness is vouchsafed; and she was the mother who had chided and forgiven.

Gradually he became more quiet, and at last the countess ventured another question.

"Tell me, Robert," she said, "does he look well, or ill? Is he well, Robert?"

"Yes, my lady."

"How does he look? Tell me! I cannot bear it to wait much longer."

"He looks — just as he did — the day he went away," came the reply, with spasmodic interruptions. "I was passing the corner of St. James Street and Piccadilly, my lady, and I saw him standing there. He was looking at the crowd without seeming to see it. I watched him for some time before I dared to speak. I went around him; I stood on either side of him, first

one side and then the other, and then directly in front of him, but although he looked at me, he did not see me. I wanted to make sure that it was his lordship before I addressed him. I had been looking for him so long, that I was afraid lest my old eyes had played me a trick, or that my imagination had superseded my judgment. All the same, my lady, I was sure from the first, and the more I looked, the surer I became; and at last I spoke to him."

"Yes, Robert, yes; go on. I am listening. You spoke to him; and then —"

"Why, then, my lady, I am afraid I do not rightly remember just what I did say. You know I have been thinking over what I would say to him when we met, every day since he went away, but I somehow forgot it all then. I said just what came to me first, I suppose, but I don't in the least remember what it was except that I called him Jack, just as I used to do when he was a boy; and then, my lady — oh, it was horrible!"

"What was horrible, Robert?"

"He turned and looked at me as if I were a perfect stranger. There was not a single sign of recognition about him. I do not know all that was said, only that he was sure that he had never seen me before. You see, my lady, some

96 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

accident must have happened to him the night he went away — some accident that made him forget who he was, his name and everything about himself. You have heard of such cases, my lady? ”

“ Yes, Robert. Yes; — yes! ”

“ I discovered that at once, for he was so natural, and like himself in every other way, that it was the only manner in which to account for it. And I was in such terror every instant, fearing that he would leave me. At first I tried to make him remember, by reminding him that I had carried him in my arms when he was a little lad, but that and other things I mentioned had no effect on him. He told me that I was an utter stranger to him, but he said he believed that I was in earnest and that he wished that he could help me to find my master. That wish was the straw I seized; and then I asked him if he would tell me his name.”

Robert had by this time recovered from the effects of his late emotions, and now he rose from the chair and returned to the mantel, where he took once more the respectful attitude of a servant.

“ He told me that his name was John Ashton, and when I informed him that my master was the Earl of Ashton and Cowingford, it seemed for

an instant to revive a spark of memory; but it was only for an instant. The name is the only part of his past that he recollects at all, and in some strange way he has accounted for it by fixing in his mind the belief that he was named for an Englishman who was a friend of his parents; who was at Oxford with his father, doubtless. Think of it, my lady. He told me that his full name is John Cowingford Ashton. As soon as I heard him say that, I felt sure that it would be only a question of time when his memory would return fully. Don't you think so, my lady? Don't you think so?"

"Yes, yes, Robert. We will make him remember; you and I together. Did — did you mention my name to him, Robert?"

"Not yet, my lady; not quite yet. It was too soon. I thought it best to wait. My first duty was to get him home."

"How did you do that, Robert? Ah! Suppose you had failed!"

"I did not fail, my lady. He had said that he would like to help me to find my lost master, and I asked him to come here where I could tell him all about it, so that he could give me his advice. At first he said he would come to-morrow, but I did not dare let him out of my sight, and at last I prevailed upon him to enter a cab and come here.

98 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

I tell you, my lady, I could have leaped for joy when at last I had him comfortably seated beside the grate in my room, wearing his own jacket and slippers, with a glass of sherry beside him and a cigar between his fingers, looking for all the world as though he had not been away at all. He was hungry and tired, and I prepared some supper for him. It would have done your heart good to have seen him eat, and to have seen him smoke, too, after he had eaten. You remember what a smoker he always was, my lady? "

"I remember — everything, Robert."

"He did not like it, though, because I kept calling him my lord. It made him angry, and twice he came very near leaving the house on account of it. I think, really, though, that it amused him more than it angered him, and that he objected more on my account than on his own. He actually thought I was a little queer in my head, and he did not approve of my deceiving myself in that way. You know that his lordship always thought more about the feelings of other people than of his own. Why, my lady, there is only one change — one little bit of change that I can discover at all; just one and it is hardly noticeable."

"What is it, Robert? "

"His manner of speaking. The voice is the

same; perhaps a trifle deeper, but that can be accounted for by exposure; but his manner of speaking is just a little different. I should say that during the year he has been away, he has been in America, or Australia, where I am told they do not pronounce their words — that is, all of them — just as they do here, and you know, if the accident deprived him of memory, it naturally must have made him forget how he used to pronounce his words. He has learned a different way of talking just as he has learned a different way of thinking; and it is not so very different either.”

“Tell me,” said the countess, slowly, “what you said to him after he had eaten his supper. Tell me what happened then.”

“My lady, that is the hard part of it. That is the part that is so difficult to tell. It is what made me hesitate about revealing the truth to you when I came into your presence a little while ago. You must bear in mind that his lordship’s memory is entirely gone, and that in place of it there are hallucinations — strange and unaccountable hallucinations. My lady, are you strong enough to hear it all, and do you believe that you can control your emotions sufficiently to be patient, and to do the hardest thing that ever anybody had to do — wait?”

100 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

"Yes, Robert. I am strong enough. As for waiting, have I not waited with patience a whole year, without knowing where he was or what he was doing? Did you think that my fortitude would desert me now that I do know where he is and what he is doing? Yes, yes! I can wait and watch, and help. Tell me what it is you want to say. Is it that he has forgotten me? Is it that he has forgotten my very existence? Is it that he does not remember our childhood, our courtship—the wedding itself? Is it that he has forgotten that he has a wife? Tell me, Robert, and tell me plainly. I am strong enough to hear it, and what is more, I am strong enough to help you to make him remember. Surely that is enough. Tell me the worst, first. Let me hear the best, last; and then we will consult together and decide what is best to do for his sake. We will not consider ourselves, Robert; we will only think of him, and of what is best for him. Tell me, Robert; has he forgotten me, utterly?"

"Yes, my lady, he has forgotten you—utterly!" was the sad response.

CHAPTER VII

THE PORTRAIT OF SIR RODERICK

THERE were several moments after Robert replied to her question during which the countess remained immovable, with her head bowed and her hands resting idly upon the arms of the chair. She had said that she was strong enough to hear the truth, and she was, but it had come to her with a greater shock than she had anticipated. There is nothing so terrible as to be forgotten by one who is loved. It is the only heart poison for which there is no antidote; it is the only mental calamity for which there is no specific.

“If I could only go to him unawares,” she murmured at last, addressing no one and merely voicing the thoughts that were uppermost in her mind. “If I could only approach him silently while his back was turned and throw my arms around him and turn his face towards me so that he could look into my eyes, he would know me then.”

“No, no, my lady!” cried Robert, infinitely

startled. "Such a thing is not to be thought of. It would frighten him away. You would undo all that has been done and render us much worse off than we were before he was found. No, no, you must not do that."

"Must not, Robert?"

"Must not, my lady. Pardon me, but it is true. Listen, and I will tell you why."

"Well?"

"I thought at one time as you think now, that he would remember your face, and I resolved to make the test by showing him a photograph of you; but first I deemed it best to speak of you."

"Yes, Robert."

"I did so in the most commonplace manner that I could, and on the instant he leaped to his feet, kicked off the slippers, threw off the smoking jacket, and cried out, 'Good God, Robert, is there a countess?' What could I do, my lady? He was for leaving the house then and there, insisting that he was in a false position. 'Where is she?' he demanded. 'Here in this house? You don't suppose I want to be caught here under these circumstances, do you?' He called for his hat, and I had all I could do to make him remain. I had to tell him that you were abroad, and that the woman in the house was a servant, an invalid who never left her room. I think he

thought it might be the housekeeper, but it was the only way that I could keep him. After that I induced him to look at your picture. That came about quite naturally, for he first asked to see a photograph of himself."

"Of himself! Did he ask for it in that way?"

"No, my lady, no. He asked me if I had a picture of the earl, and when I gave him one to look at, he went to the mirror and remained for quite a time, looking first at it, and then at his own reflection in the glass. I could see that it puzzled him mightily, too."

"What did he say? Did he speak about the likeness?"

"Yes. He admitted that he did not blame me for being deceived, if that was a picture of the earl; and then I gave him your likeness."

"Well, Robert, well? Tell me what he said and did then, Robert. Forget nothing. I want to know every look and word. What then, Robert?"

"Well, my lady, he just looked at it, that was all. Then he said, in the calmest manner, that you were very beautiful; but there was not the least sign of recognition in his face. He kept the picture in his possession, though, and I noticed that he fixed his eyes upon it very often while we talked, as though there was something

104 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

about it which touched a chord of memory. I have heard that people afflicted as he is realize that they have forgotten things, and are ashamed of it, and because they are, deny everything which might betray them. I thought, maybe, it was so with him, and that he was so emphatic in his denial of everything simply because he could not remember well enough to be sure. Don't you think such a thing is possible? "

"Undoubtedly, Robert."

"I am very sure that I saw signs of his remembering things, when he thought I did not notice. But you must not think of permitting him to see you yet, and we must not let him suspect that you are in the house. It would not do. It would drive him away at once. I am sure of it."

Lady Mercy sighed heavily. With every fibre trembling from suppressed excitement — with every impulse of her soul straining upon the leash which separated her from her husband — with the intelligence that he was in the same house with her, almost within reach of her hands, and with the certain knowledge that she must not go to him — that he would repulse her if she did so, she felt that the situation was more than she could bear.

"How long will it be, Robert? How long a

time do you think it will be before I can go to him?" she murmured, brokenly.

The old servant shook his head.

"I cannot tell," he replied. "Nobody can tell. In a day or two we may be able to approximate the time; now, it would be wrong to attempt to do so. You will listen to old Robert? You will be guided by me, my lady?"

"Yes," she whispered; and then human nature conquered. She leaned forward upon the arm of her chair and wept.

Robert was too wise in his generation to disturb her, for he knew that her tears would do more than any argument he could use, to convince her of the wisdom of his advice. He waited patiently and silently until the paroxysm had passed, and at last she raised her head and spoke.

"How did you prevail upon him to remain over night?" she asked.

"It was, strangely enough, not difficult to do," he replied, "although I am of the opinion that he consented solely as a favour to me. It is true that he started to go, but the hour was late and he was very tired. I put him to bed in his lordship's old room, and he has consented to remain there until I take him his coffee in the morning. I have dreadful misgivings, though, for to-morrow."

106 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

"Misgivings? What are they?"

"He will wish to go away, and, my lady, I cannot think of any plan by which I can induce him to remain. His conviction that he is a stranger and that he has no right here, more than that, his firm belief that in remaining he is taking an ungentlemanly advantage of the real earl, will, I am sure, overcome every argument that I can offer."

The countess bowed her head in thought. Presently she raised it again, and there was the light of confident knowledge in her eyes.

"God, who sent him back to us," she said slowly, "will not permit him to leave us again. He will remain, Robert. I feel it. I know it. There will be a way provided to detain him. Leave it in the hands of Him who directed your footsteps to the spot where your master awaited you. He will wish to go out, naturally, but you must go with him. You can find a reason for accompanying him. You must find one."

"Yes, my lady. But about his going abroad before he recovers his memory. Have you thought what that may involve?"

"No; what do you mean?"

"He is sure to be seen and recognized by some of his friends. They will address him and he will not know them. Others will bow to him —

ladies, perhaps — and he will not recognize them. There will be no end of complications of all sorts, and I tremble, my lady, for the task that is before me. I fear that I am not equal to it. I am too old. My perceptions are not keen enough. My judgment is not always clear."

"That, also," she replied reverently, "must be left to the will of God. Even though such things as you suggest should happen, they are mere incidents, and we need give them no unnecessary concern. He has returned; that is the one great blessing, and the lesser ones will come with time if we are patient, watchful and firm. But, Robert, before he goes out again, I must see him."

"My lady!"

"I must see him, Robert, without myself being seen. I must see him, Robert; I must!"

"But how?"

"Cannot you think of a plan?"

The old man thought deeply, standing with the ends of his thumbs and fingers together and rocking forward and backward upon his toes and heels, a thing that he would never have done in the presence of his mistress had his mind been less occupied. Suddenly his face brightened and he looked up eagerly.

"There is a way," he said, "an excellent way,

108 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

and it can be done without the slightest danger, but I will have to commit an act of vandalism which you may not feel inclined to permit."

"An act of vandalism, Robert? I do not understand."

"Do you remember, my lady, the portrait of one of the earl's ancestors which stands upon an easel in one corner of the library? The portrait of Sir Roderick of Hertford, the Crusader?"

"Yes."

"You shall see my lord through the eyes of Sir Roderick the Crusader," continued the old man eagerly, now thoroughly enthused with the idea. "Nothing could be easier. With my penknife, I will cut out the pupils of the eyes in the portrait, — afterwards, you know I can paste a bit of black cloth against them and the defacement will not be noticeable, — then I will draw the easel a trifle closer in the corner, and — don't you understand, my lady? You will get behind the picture. The curtains which drape the window will conceal you on one side, and the bookcase will effectually screen you on the other, so that he could not by any possibility see you, unless he should make a point of peering behind the easel. He is sure to look at that portrait long and earnestly, for he fairly worshipped it when he was a boy. Why, even since he became

a man, I have seen him stand and gaze at that picture for minutes at a time. It always seemed to have some sort of fascination for him, and when he was a little fellow, he used to ask me the strangest questions about it. It may be that he will be angry when he finds that I have used my penknife on his favourite picture. Do you think he will, my lady? "

" No, Robert. When his memory has returned to him with sufficient force to make him realize what you have done, he will bless you, not blame you for it. He has often told me about the picture. When we were children, we often looked at it together, and I remember that he used to say then that the eyes always seemed to him as if they were in a living person. Yes, he will look at the picture, and in doing so, he will look into my eyes."

" Suppose, my lady, that he should look at it too long, and that you should give way and betray your presence? "

" I will not do that, Robert."

" I have seen him stand for a whole hour before it. His lordship used to tell me that when anything troubled him, he went and told it to the old earl, as he called the portrait, and that it always did him good. Will you try to rest now, my lady? Please. I will go to the library and

110 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

prepare the portrait, and when it is time, I will call you and assist you to your place behind it. Then I will take his lordship to the library, and after that — after that, I am afraid I will not have a chance to see you for several hours. I fear, my lady, I fear very much that you will have to prepare your own luncheon.”

For the first time since their interview began, Lady Mercy smiled. Then she glided forward and, raising herself on tiptoe, before Robert could understand what she intended to do, she touched her lips to his forehead.

The old man tottered backwards as though a bullet had struck him, and his face became fiery red, like that of a schoolboy who has been surreptitiously kissed by a wilful playmate.

“My lady,” he said, severely, “you should not have done that. One would think that you were back again in short dresses — but I thank you for it. It is a much greater reward than I ever could deserve.”

The countess did not have an opportunity to reply, for Robert bowed with great dignity, and left the room.

CHAPTER VIII

THE IDENTIFICATION MARK

WITH the advent of daylight Robert betook himself to the library and performed the work of preparing it for the silent interview that was to take place there, and so firm was his belief in the righteousness of the deed that his hand did not tremble when he desecrated the old portrait of that ancient and now almost forgotten head of the family, Sir Roderick Hertford, the Crusader.

This duty done and everything arranged to his satisfaction, his next care was for the countess. She was aroused somewhat earlier than usual, and while he passed the tray in at her door, he assured her that he would summon her to the library in ample time for her to conceal herself before he should conduct the earl thither — and then he hastened to his new-found master's bedside.

Ashton was wide awake when Robert entered the room, and he regarded the old servant with

112 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

a quizzical smile while the latter was arranging the window shades to admit the morning sunlight.

"Good morning, sir," Robert said, on entering the room and perceiving that his guest was not sleeping.

He spoke with cheery brightness. His old face beamed like the sunshine that gladdened the world outside, and there was a confidence in his manner that had been utterly wanting at their last interview.

"Good morning, Robert," responded Ashton. "You look as though the sunlight of a new day had burned away all the fog that clouded your brain last night. I hope it has."

"Yes, sir. It has, quite. There isn't a bit of fog there now."

"Well, that's comforting, surely. What time is it?"

"Eight o'clock, sir, and a beautiful morning it is, too. Did you rest well? Did you sleep quite soundly, sir?"

"Like a top."

"That is good, very good. There is nothing like one's own bed for good repose, but," he added with precipitate haste, "good, healthy fatigue will induce sleep anywhere. Now, sir, I will prepare your bath; here is the robe if you care to slip it on for a moment. When you have

tubbed I will shave you as you have not been shaved for a year."

He turned away before Ashton could reply, and the latter, half smiling, murmured to himself:

"I believe the old rascal is as positive as ever that I am Lord Ashton, and that now he is playing possum, just to put me off my guard. There must be some way to convince him of his error, and, for the old man's sake, I must find it. The trouble is, that everything I attempt seems to rivet his faith the stronger." Then he sprang from the bed, but his mind continued on in the same strain.

"Who, for instance," he mused, "would have imagined that the slippers and jacket would fit me so exactly, to say nothing of the unaccountable likeness between the lost earl and myself? If I had not shaved off my beard and moustache, Robert would never have mistaken me, for that the act did make a great alteration in my appearance, I have the proof in the failure of my friends to recognize me that last day I spent in New York."

His eyes followed the servant as he busied himself in the preparation of the bath, arranging towels and cloths, flesh brushes and the general paraphernalia of the matutinal plunge; and again

114 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

he smiled to himself, for he remembered, suddenly, that there was upon his body one mark which the lost earl could not possibly have possessed.

It was on his left breast, over that spot where the heart is popularly supposed to be located, and it was itself the ineradicable evidence of an unknown tattooer's skill, imprinted there before the time when he could remember, and never explained by his supposed uncle, Henry Hollister. Doubtless the people who abandoned him as an infant before the banker's door had marked him for recognition.

At all events it was there, faint now, from the wear of time, and by reason of the growth and expansion of the cuticle, but nevertheless discernible.

"That will convince him as nothing else could," thought Ashton as he threw aside the robe and plunged into the bath that Robert had prepared.

"Robert," he called, when his skin was glowing from the application of the rough towels, "come here."

"I want you to look at this mark on my breast. What is it, Robert?"

"A heart, sir."

"That is right; a heart. Did you ever see that before, Robert?"

"Yes, sir, often."

"What?"

"Hundreds of times, sir."

"The devil you did! By the lord Harry, old man, you make me think that you are either a hopeless lunatic, a blithering idiot, or a damned old rascal. Do you mean to tell me that the earl had a mark like that on his breast?"

"Yes, sir, precisely like it."

Ashton could only stare at the servant in amazement, and the latter, perceiving his advantage, was not loath to make the most of it.

"Don't you remember now, sir, how you used to ask me about that mark when you were a boy, and how we used to wonder how it came there? Neither your father nor your mother would ever tell you anything about it, and once, sir, when you begged me to do so, I made bold to ask the old earl, and he came mighty near sending me away for it; don't you remember that?"

"No. I'm blessed if I do. Go on; what more have you got to say about it? Let it all out now, for you'll never have another chance."

"Why, there isn't anything more to say, sir, unless it is that the mark has faded somewhat more than I should have thought it would in one year. Still, I suppose you have been travelling in a different climate, and that may have had

116 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

something to do with it. Don't you think so, sir? "

" Oh, undoubtedly! " exclaimed Ashton with bitter irony. " Look here, Robert, there is surely something wrong about that cranium of yours. I am strongly of the opinion that you have got the worst kind of wheels in it, and every one of them is going the wrong way."

" Wheels, sir? "

" Yes, wheels. That is an Americanism, Robert, and I am an American. Do you understand that? "

" I supposed that you had been in America or Australia, sir, from your manner of speaking. I guessed that, sir."

" Oh, you did! Well, you are the champion guesser of two continents, I'll admit that. Do you insist that your lost earl had a mark like that on *his* breast? "

" Precisely like it, sir."

" Can you prove it? "

" Easily, sir."

" How? "

" By a letter you wrote to me when — "

" By a letter that I wrote to you! "

" By a letter that you wrote to me when you were at Hertford Hall at the time when I asked your father about it," continued Robert firmly, for

the old man had taken the bit in his teeth at last, and he refused to compromise with what he believed to be the truth.

He saw, or thought he saw the advantage he had gained, and he determined to make the most of it before the opportunity was gone. He had been compelled, up to that moment, to administer only homœopathic doses of memory to the strangely afflicted earl, but now he meant to give him the genuine article to swallow.

"You had urged me so many times to ask your father about it," he went on, "that I finally did so, and then, according to promise, I wrote to you of my failure, telling you that his lordship very nearly dismissed me for my impertinence. You wrote a letter back, thanking me, and assuring me that you would make it all right with your father, and that you would take all the blame. I have that letter, my lord, as I have all that you ever wrote to me, and I can find it in ten minutes."

"Humph! Well, you trot right down stairs and find it, then, while I am getting into my clothes. I'd like to see that letter, for upon my soul, I don't believe that you possess such a document. After that, I'll bid you good morning, for it is utterly abhorrent to every principle of my nature for me to remain here and even pas-

118 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

sively become a party to the deception that you are determined to practise upon yourself."

"Oh, sir —"

"Stop! Not another word. I won't have it! I warned you last night, but the warning seems to have done no good. I will not repeat it, nor will I give you the chance to err again.

"Go and get that letter."

"Yes, sir; yes, sir. I will get it;" and with ashen face the old man tottered from the room.

"This certainly beats everything I ever heard of or read about," said Ashton aloud when he was again alone; and then, while he busied himself in dressing, he continued to think upon the labyrinth of coincidence apparently conspiring to force him to accept a false position.

There was the unaccountable coincidence of likeness between the lost earl and himself, which nobody, himself included, could deny. There was the coincidence of names; on the one hand, the earl of Ashton and Cowingford, and on the other, John Cowingford Ashton. There was the same physique and doubtless the same voice, for a change in voice is more quickly discernible than any other attribute of man; and last, there was the coincidence of the tattooed heart on the left breast, and if Robert was right and did possess the letter to which he had re-

ferred, the old man could scarcely be condemned for the opinion he had formed regarding the identity of his guest. Ashton realized that fully, but he was determined that he would put a stop to it.

How to account for these coincidences was entirely beyond the subject of them. It is true that he was a foundling, and the suggestion was pertinent that it might develop that he was related to the missing earl. He might be a cousin, or even a twin brother, since it was shown that their ages were practically the same, and might be exactly so for all that Ashton could tell, but opposed to such a theory was the undeniable fact that one was born and had always lived in England, while the other was found on a doorstep in the city of New York.

The name might easily be accounted for by the statement of Henry Hollister that he had named the foundling for a college associate, and that friend might possibly have been the father of the missing earl, only in that case the name would more likely have been Hertford.

John Ashton shook his head in deep perplexity. He was only clear about one thing, and that was that he would get away from the complication before old Robert could work himself any deeper into the mire of credulity; and just as he arrived at that decision Robert returned.

120 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

"Here it is, sir," he said, extending a letter which Ashton received and read to the last word. Then he replaced it in the envelope and returned it.

"Very good," he said calmly. "I am convinced that you spoke the truth and I owe you an apology for doubting you, Robert. Now I wish to ask you a few questions."

"Yes, sir. I will reply to them if I can."

"Did the earl ever have a brother?"

"No, sir, he was an only child."

"You are sure of that, Robert?"

"Positive, sir; I have been in the family all my life — ever since his father was a lad."

"Did he have a cousin — a male cousin, or a near relative who was stolen while he was a babe? I mean one about his own age, or, in fact, any age at all?"

"No, sir, never."

"You would be likely to know about it if such a thing had occurred in the family?"

"I am sure that I would know about it."

"Why are you so sure about it?"

"Because I have been in the family so long, sir, and because the family has never been a large one. Mr. Richard Hertford is the nearest relative that my master ever had with the exception of his own parents."

"Where was the Earl of Ashton born?"

"At Hertford Hall."

"Were you there at the time?"

"Not exactly, sir. I was with his father, here in London. We were telegraphed for, and went down on the afternoon train. The Viscount was born at two in the afternoon, and we arrived there at seven in the evening. I remember it as well as though it were yesterday, sir."

"Humph! Your statement seems to be unanswerable, Robert. You ought to know."

"I do know, sir."

Ashton was silent. He believed that under the circumstances it would be little less than a downright act of cruelty for him to go away without first dispelling the delusion in Robert's mind, and he was now convinced that the old servant was genuinely deceived.

Again, there was the countess. Robert had said that she was travelling abroad. Ere long she would return to be met by Robert's statement that the earl was surely alive, had been at home, and had gone away again, he could not tell whither; and the countess, possibly on the point of forming new ties, or at least partly recovered from the effects of her loss, would be cast into a new slough of despondency, infinitely worse than the first.

122 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

"Robert," he said presently, "I wish to have a real, downright, sensible talk with you."

"Yes, sir."

"And I want you to reply to me with perfect truth."

"I will do so, sir."

"You must neither equivocate nor temporize. The time is past for that, now."

"Very well, sir."

"Do you really believe that I am the Earl of Ashton and Cowingford?"

"I do, sir."

"Does it amount to more than mere belief? Are you, in your own mind, certain of it?"

"I am, sir."

"Since when, Robert?"

"Since the first moment that I saw you."

"Has nothing happened since that moment to shake your faith?"

"No, sir, nothing."

"Not even my own positive denial?"

"Not even that, sir."

"Well, that is cool to say the least. Let us begin now on the supposition that I am the lost Lord Ashton; what object would I have in denying it?"

"Only your own conviction, sir. I believe that you are sincere in denying it. I believe that you

THE IDENTIFICATION MARK 123

think you are some other person — that you have forgotten who you really are."

"Well, by Jove!" exclaimed Ashton, aghast at the spectacle that Robert had created. Then, with sudden sadness, he added: "I wish to God I could forget who I really am."

"And I, sir, wish to God, with all my heart, that you could remember who you really are," Robert responded. "Try, sir, try! Did not the picture of my lady compel some responsive memory in your heart? I thought that I saw it there when you looked at the photograph."

"Hush, Robert. Can you not understand how preposterous your belief is? If I were the earl, how could I have forgotten it?"

"By reason of some accident, sir, or a severe illness. It would not be the first case of the kind. Men have met with accidents which have deprived them of memory and made them forget the past."

"But I do not forget the past, my good man. God Almighty knows that I remember it only too well — that I would leap for joy if I could erase every recollection of it from my mind forever. Good heavens, do you suppose that I would hesitate one instant between the misery of that past and the promised joys of this present, if there were any doubts concerning the truth?"

124 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

If I were Lord Ashton, do you think I would deny it to you? Was there, could there have been any cause that you have kept back from me which could have induced your master to leave home of his own accord? "

" Not one."

" Is there no way by which I can convince you of your error, Robert? It must be done."

" I am sure, sir, that there is not."

" Well, for downright obstinacy, you are head and shoulders over anything I ever saw. Can't you think of some test that we might apply, that would convince you? Was there no other mark upon me besides that confounded tattoo business? "

" Not that I remember, sir."

" I am bound to convince you, somehow, Robert, for I will not remain here and permit you to live under any such hallucination. I shall leave England to-morrow, but before I go, you must be convinced."

" Oh, sir," cried Robert, " you will not leave England! I'll die if you do that."

" Yes, I shall leave England; consider that settled."

The announcement was too much for the old man. He sank upon a chair and sobbed aloud, and Ashton, after regarding him a moment with

consternation and deep contrition in his face, added:

"Tut, tut, Robert. None of that. Stand up and listen to me. There, that is better, old chap. You make me feel like an infernal scoundrel — as though, somehow, I hadn't any right to assert my own identity. Would you know the handwriting of the earl, if you should see it?"

"Indeed I would, sir."

"Then get me pen, ink and paper. You shall see some that is not his."

"Yes, sir. We will go to the library, sir, if you will wait a moment here until I return. I will be gone only a few moments."

CHAPTER IX

BEHIND THE PORTRAIT

ASHTON was rather startled by the precipitate haste with which Robert left the room, but he attributed it to his desire to compose himself before that test of handwriting, which Ashton intended should be final, was tried.

There was, indeed, some truth in the conjecture, for the faithful old man did wish to compose his countenance before going into the presence of the countess, who he knew was impatiently awaiting the summons to the library where from behind the screen offered by the portrait of the crusader she could look again upon the face and form of the man she loved.

She instantly detected, however, the perturbation depicted upon Robert's countenance.

"What is it, Robert? What has happened?" she demanded, the moment he made his appearance.

"He is determined to leave us, my lady," sobbed the old man. "He is going away, and

to-morrow he says he will leave England. What shall we do? What can we do? "

" He must be prevented from going. There will be a way, Robert. Wait until I have seen him. There will be time enough after that. Are you ready to take me to the library? "

" Yes, my lady."

" Come, then."

She went past him, through the open doorway, and on down the stairs so rapidly that he found it difficult to keep pace with her. Her own hands seized the easel against which the portrait rested, but she was not strong enough to move it from its place. It was Robert who did that, and when she had passed behind it and applied her eyes to the holes that Robert's penknife had made, he moved it back again so that she was effectually a prisoner.

" Can you see around the room? " he asked when everything was adjusted.

" Perfectly. Do you think it will be possible for him to detect me here? "

" No, my lady, I do not. It is barely possible for me to discover the defect, and I know that it is there. He, not knowing it, will never suspect your presence. Do you think you will be able to retain your composure? "

" Yes, Robert."

128 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

"No matter what he says or does?"

"Yes; I will not give way. Go, Robert, go; he is waiting."

"One moment, and I will go," he replied. Then with deft fingers he placed writing materials upon the table, arranged the curtains to suit him, and hastened back to the room where he had left his guest.

"Come, sir," he said. "I will take you to the library now, if you please."

Ashton did not reply. He followed his conductor in silence along the hall and down the stairs to the library door, passed inside and paused.

The portrait of Sir Roderick was in the corner directly opposite the point where he entered the room. It was a striking picture; one that would have claimed attention anywhere, particularly the attention of one as fond of art as John Ashton, and he experienced an uncanny feeling as his gaze encountered the eyes of the portrait which were fixed upon him as though the stern old warrior did not entirely approve of his intrusion.

"Whom does that portrait represent? One of the family ancestors?" he inquired.

"That is Sir Roderick; the portrait you used to love so dearly. Look closer, my lord. You will remember it."

"Confound you, Robert. If I were not so sorry for you I would be angry."

"Will you not look at the portrait more closely, sir?" asked Robert unmoved.

"Not now. After we have tried that hand-writing, I will. Where are the materials? Ah, here they are. What shall I write?"

"Do you wish me to dictate it, my lord?"

"Yes."

"The last letter that I received from your lordship read something like this," said the old man, calmly, determined that, inasmuch as he had now boldly asserted his unfaltering belief, he would adhere to it in public as well as in private. "Are you ready?"

"Yes."

"'Robert Smithson'—never mind the address—'Send Powers to the station at 9.45'—9.45 in figures, sir—'to-morrow morning. He should bring the carriage as I shall have a friend or two with me.' That is all, my lord."

"How did he sign it?" asked Ashton, pausing with uplifted pen, when the short note was finished.

"Just 'Ashton,' my lord. Sometimes you signed John Hertford, to checks and things of that sort, but you rarely used Cowingford. You usually preferred to use the other name. Your

130 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

letters to me were always signed with the one name."

"Oh, they were, eh? Well, there it is. Now take a look at it, and it may be that you will be convinced of your folly."

He threw down the pen, and, rising, crossed the room until he stood before the portrait behind which the countess was concealed, and Robert, who took two or three steps toward the table to comply with the request, noticing what he had done, stopped suddenly, too deeply concerned over the possible discovery of the presence of the countess to care to inspect the handwriting which he was already convinced did not need inspection, and so fearful that his mistress might do something to betray her presence, that instantly he forgot everything except her purpose in coming to the library.

Ashton, in his turn, forgot what Robert was supposed to be doing in the unaccountable fascination he felt for the portrait. He remained, several moments, motionless, regarding it steadily, feeling, with a tingling sense of uncanniness, that the gaze was returned.

He was vaguely conscious of an inexplicable attraction towards the likeness of the man who had rested so many centuries in the grave, and he experienced an indefinable wish that he could

change places with the knight who looked down upon him with a glance as bold as any with which he had met the infidel Saracen on his native deserts. Twice he attempted to turn away, only to discover that the portrait drew his eyes to the pictured face with an irresistible attraction.

Presently he turned his gaze upon other paintings in the room, only to find that the eyes of Sir Roderick gleamed upon him from each, and that the countenance of the warrior was drawn in the sunsets, in the landscapes, among the trees, and in the portraits of every work of art with which the walls were decorated.

Robert, in the meantime, had approached within a few feet of his supposed master, and standing directly behind him, physically paralyzed by suppressed excitement, awaited the result. His fingers were interlocked and each hand strained upon the other with unrelaxed tension, so that the knuckles gleamed brightly red, like clouded rubies, the veins in the backs of his hands became purple and swollen, and contrasted strangely with the surrounding pallor.

His face was as white as the face of a corpse, except in two spots over his eyes, where the blood seemed to have collected its forces and paused, held there by the power of the will to assist the visual organs. He had paused in the act of

132 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

stepping. His weight rested on the ball of his right foot while the toe of the left one seemed barely to touch the carpet. Had he been one of the victims of Vesuvius in the destruction of Pompeii and Herculaneum, overtaken in his agonizing flight by the deadly sulphur fumes, engulfed, sustained and preserved by the flood of ashes that followed, and recreated by modern art as other figures have been, anxiety, terror, hope, doubt, faith and unbelief could not have been more delicately depicted. He saw what Ashton could not see. He knew what Ashton did not know. He realized fully what Ashton only sensed, as one experiences realities in dreams, that there was life and hope and love, light and warmth and feeling in the expression of the eyes that looked down upon them from the picture.

Ashton saw only that there was something living beyond and behind that painted canvas; he saw it without belief or realization; he realized it without sight or sense; he imagined all that his inner being revealed without trusting to his imagination; he felt that his pulses thrilled, yet denied to himself that they were stirred; he breathed more deeply yet with shorter inhalations, while he seemed not to be breathing at all; he saw moisture in the depths of those eyes, and wondered if a painter's art had permitted the

brush to depict a reality like that, knowing while he wondered that art had never builded so high; and then while still attracted and repulsed, beckoned and repelled as though he were the steel between the positive and the negative poles of a magnet, by a strange paradox, he remembered Hope.

There was no more likeness between the picture and Hope Hollister than there might have been between the icebergs of the frozen north and the sands of blistered Sahara, but still there was the thought. There was no likeness at all between Hope Hollister and the woman whose identity glowed behind the eyes of the portrait; yet, still, there was the thought. There was absolutely nothing in the circumstances or in the surroundings to suggest Hope Hollister to his mind, and yet the thought came and brought with it an indescribable feeling of awe and a wave of tenderness which at once enthralled and attracted him, and he drew a step nearer to the canvas.

With his eyes fixed intently upon the pupils of those orbs that seemed to him to beckon him on, he paused again and sighed, raising his right hand and passing it methodically across his brow.

For the moment he forgot where he was, for across the wide ocean, among the mazes of that

134 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

great city, through the thick walls of the house and into the room where he stood leaped the image of the woman he had loved so devoutly — whom he now loved so despairingly — whose memory throughout the year of wandering had been his safeguard, his mentor, his religion.

"Hope, Hope!" he murmured. "My lost love. What is it that brings you before me now, so vividly that I can see every lineament of your dear face in the grim visage of this old warrior? What is the magic of this portrait which makes you look at me out of his eyes? What has cast the spell of your presence in this room, strange to me and to you alike? Are you thinking of me, my Hope? Has the past year of separation been as bitter to you as it has been to me?"

He ceased speaking. Robert, not daring to move, remained like a graven image hoping, doubting, fearing, wondering.

There were several moments of absolute silence, and then with startling distinctness, seemingly from behind the picture, there came a heart-breaking sigh.

Ashton came to himself with a start, and he turned instantly to Robert.

"What was that?" he demanded. "Who made that sound?"

"I, your lordship. I did it," replied Robert.

with strange eagerness. He could lie for others, if not for himself.

Still Ashton doubted, while knowing that he ought not to doubt — while believing that there was no reason to doubt. He shook his head incredulously.

"It came from behind the picture," he said.

Robert, not knowing what to reply, said nothing. It was the wisest course he could have pursued, and the next moment Ashton had turned his face once again upon the portrait and was once more plunged in his own thoughts.

It was the appeal that he had made to his lost love that had forced the sigh from the countess, for she, like Robert, believed that he was appealing to his memory of her. The name Hope was only a word to her. Taken in connection with the words that followed, the man who uttered them was only battling with forgetfulness and *hoping* that the veil which hid the past from view might be drawn aside.

"Are you thinking of me, my Hope?" he had said. "Has the past year of separation been as bitter to you as it has been to me?"

His eyes were looking straight into hers; her gaze was peering into the utmost depths of his soul when the words were uttered; is it strange that she sighed?

136 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

She saw all that Robert had seen; she believed all that Robert believed. The boy with whom she had played in childhood, the man whom she had loved and married and from whom she was parted on her wedding day, stood before her, and she dared not make her presence known.

When he turned to speak to Robert she quickly brushed the tears from her eyes, so that when he looked again toward her she believed that she was prepared to meet his glance, but she was in nowise prepared for what she saw.

For the first time in all the months that had passed since John Ashton and Hope parted in the counting-room of Henry Hollister's bank, tears welled up from his soul through his eyes and rolled unheeded down his cheeks. But it was only for a moment that he remained thus, for then through his own tears he saw, or fancied that he saw, tears in the painted eyes of the portrait.

With a quick gesture he dashed his own aside and stepped eagerly forward to obtain a nearer view.

There was no mistake. There *were* tears in the eyes of that pictured face, and while he gazed upon them in amazement, they rolled down the canvas. Tears! Real tears!

He looked again, bending forward still nearer,

and then he saw the eyes vanish as if by magic while from behind the easel he heard another sigh, half sob, half moan.

Instantly alert, he seized the painting by the frame and hurled it across the room, exposing to full view the exquisite face and quivering form of the countess, now utterly terrorized by the consciousness that her presence was betrayed and that she stood revealed before him.

CHAPTER X

THE ONLY WAY

THE anger which had been his motive in dashing the portrait aside was quelled the instant Ashton saw the living, breathing picture behind it. He remained where he was, and for a second she retained her position, neither speaking, while Robert crept slowly away toward a near-by window where he concealed himself behind the curtains.

"John?" said the countess then; "John?"

Ashton did not reply, and she moved forward, stepping through the now vacant easel and approaching slowly the spot where he was standing.

"John?" she repeated, gliding still closer to him and reaching out both hands appealingly. Then she paused, without touching him.

Still he did not move. He felt that he could not trust his own senses; his powers of utterance were paralyzed, his position unprecedented, inexplicable, confounding; and all the while there was something in the eyes of the woman so

strangely introduced into his presence which held his own in spite of himself; which commanded his silence and his respect.

But the countess could endure no more. She realized that he looked upon her with unrecognition, and the sustaining power which until now had upheld her in her effort to play the part she had undertaken gave way.

She threw herself forward upon his breast, clasping her white, soft arms around his neck, and without a sigh, or sound, lost consciousness.

She would have slipped from his grasp to the floor of the library, had not his own arms sustained her, but he caught her as she would have fallen, and lifting her gently, placed her in one of the big library chairs. Then, straightening up, he looked sharply around for Robert.

The old servant, however, was still concealed behind the curtain and was too greatly frightened, or perhaps too wise to make his presence known.

"Robert! Robert!" called Ashton, but there was no reply, and the American glanced again at his companion in the chair, discovering that her eyes were open—that she was already recovering from her swoon.

"I am rejoiced that you are better, madam," he said coldly. "I think, now that you are not

140 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

in need of assistance, and lest you might have a second attack, I will leave you."

He turned to go, but her voice compelled him to wait.

"Stop, sir; stop, one moment, I pray you!" she gasped. "Do you not see that I am suffering? Oh, for the love of God do not leave me yet!"

He fell back a step or two and paused again.

"Why do you wish me to remain?" he asked, regarding her intently and with some curiosity in his glance. "Why are you suffering? Is it because you, too, insist upon confounding my identity with that of the lost Earl of Ashton?"

"Yes," she faltered.

She had not strength enough to move; indeed she seemed to possess barely sufficient energy to speak. The trying experience through which she had passed while concealed behind the portrait, the continued repression of all her emotions, followed by the sudden and alarming dénouement, had undone her completely. In that instant she experienced greater despair than she had felt during all the long year of sorrow and waiting that had just come to a close. The hope upon which she had lived until that moment, seemed blasted now.

Ashton studied her face closely before he ventured to speak again, and then his question was uttered so deliberately, so coldly, and — to her — so cruelly, that it started her into instant life, and she sprang from the chair, apparently electrified.

“Madam,” he said, “may I be so bold as to inquire who you are?”

Then it was that she started up and confronted him with flashing eyes and flaming cheeks, re-animated, newly armed and equipped for the battle that she must wage with the most subtle foe in all the world, forgetfulness.

“I was, before I knew you, the Honourable Mercy Covington,” she said deliberately. “Now I am Lady Mercy Hertford, Countess of Ashton and of Cowingford, *your wife*.”

“Good God!” was all that Ashton could ejaculate, and he started back as though stricken by a bullet.

He had not imagined that she could be the countess. Until this moment he had not noticed the strong resemblance to the photograph he had seen the night before; Robert had told him that *she* was on the Continent, and he had supposed, if he had supposed anything, that the woman before him was some relative or friend of the family whom Robert had smuggled into the

142 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

house to assist him in convincing his guest that he was the missing earl.

Here was a complication — one which bade fair to be more trying than anything that Robert might have conjured up, and Ashton did not know how to meet it; and while he stood there, half dazed by the announcement she had made, the countess spoke again, calmly and slowly.

"John," she said, "there must be some way to make you remember. Won't you try to help me? No matter how thoroughly you may be convinced in your own mind that you are not John Hertford, won't you have patience with me and help me? Won't you, John?"

"Help you to convince me that I am your husband?" he almost shouted. "My good woman, you are mad! You must be mad!"

"No, John," she responded, as calmly as before, "it is you who are mad, not I. Do you think that I could be deceived? I, who have loved you since we were children together? I, your wife, if only in name? Robert, who has known you from the cradle, might be deceived, but not I. The whole world might be deceived, but not I. My own eyes and ears might be deceived, but not my heart, and that tells me that you are John Hertford — that you are

my husband who has come back to me after a whole year of waiting. Would my own heart fail me in an extremity like this? "

He could only gaze at her in consternation and amazement.

"Is this an asylum for the insane?" he muttered. "Am I the plaything of a lot of maniacs? "

"No," she replied as unmoved as ever, for she was determined not to give way again, "there is no one here who is insane. You have forgotten, that is all. You are in your own house, in the presence of your own wife. You were called from my side the evening of our wedding day, one year ago yesterday, and I have never seen you since that time. Yesterday, Robert met you and brought you home. Home, John, home! Has the word no significance for you, even if the name of your wife has not? "

Ashton did not immediately reply. He was thinking—trying to decide what was best to do in order to convince her of her error, and presently he decided.

There was only one way, only one. He would tell her his own history; tell her about Hope; about that scene with her in the counting-room of the bank, and the one that followed it which had ended so fatally. It would wrench his heart

144 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

strings apart, but he would tell her. It was the only way.

He crossed the room to the chair that she had occupied, drew it forward, and then stepped back again.

"Be seated, madam, if you please," he said. "I have decided to tell you a story about myself, and perhaps, when you have heard it, you will not be so eager to claim me for a relative; but first permit me to ask you a question."

She took the chair and waited expectantly.

"Robert told me that you were abroad," he continued. "Will you tell me how it happens that you are here at this time?"

"I have never left the house since I entered it on your arm, a bride," she replied.

"Am I so like your husband in everything — voice, articulation, features, motion, mannerisms?"

"Yes; you speak with more directness, perhaps, than you used to do, but the change is very slight. One year's travel in America might produce it."

"Listen, then, madam, and I will tell you my story; I see there is no help for it."

CHAPTER XI

THE MESSAGE ACROSS THE SEA

"WHEN I was a baby, possibly two or three weeks old," Ashton began, "I was found in a basket on the doorstep of the residence of a banker in the city of New York. That was nearly thirty-one years ago. The banker took me in, kept me, and reared me with as much tenderness as if I had been his own son, and indeed, until one year ago yesterday I believed myself to be his nephew. Then he undeceived me, and how, you shall hear before I have done. There was nothing about me to indicate that I had a name, and he gave me the name of a friend, an Englishman who had been his chum at college; that name is John Cowingford Ashton. The only way in which I can account for the coincidence in names, is that the father of your husband was the friend for whom I was named. I grew up in that family as happy as a boy could be made to be by tender care and love. I addressed my benefactor as uncle, and regarded

146 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

his daughter, who was born eight years after my advent, as my cousin. Her I loved with the only love that ever came into my life. When I became old enough I entered my benefactor's bank as a clerk, and step by step rose to the position of cashier, which place I held until one year ago yesterday, when I — when I gave it up and came away.

"The daughter's name was — is — Hope," he continued after a moment's pause. "You heard me utter it when I stood before the portrait, and, looking into your eyes, fancied that I saw something in them to remind me of her. We were to have been married, but because of an act of folly, all my own, and the subsequent and possibly consequent perfidy and shamelessness of a woman — because of that, I am here. Because of that the ceremony never was and never can be performed. I cannot explain that act to you except to say that I permitted myself to make love to that other woman; and that Hope believed I sinned beyond her power to forgive, sinned beyond redemption in her eyes. Nay, I will be entirely frank with you. Why not? It is your right to know the truth in order that you may be convinced. I will tell it all to you. There was a young woman in New York who chose to flatter me with the outward expression of her

regard. She was beautiful, attractive, possessed of certain fascinations she well knew how to use, and I — I flirted with her, or permitted myself to be flirted with. Pray do not think that I am attempting to belittle my own fault. But I saw the folly of it all very quickly. I sought — blunderingly, I suppose — to withdraw from the unpleasant complication, for while my tongue had wandered from its loyalty to Hope, my heart never had. Nor had there been any acts of indiscretion, beyond a few tender hand clasps, some whispered and meaningless sentences, and one, just one, spasmodic embrace and kiss in the conservatory of her guardian's house. Nothing more than the things I have described, I swear! And yet that woman chose to deceive herself into the belief that she loved me. She wrote many letters to me! I replied to only one, the first. Finally her letters became threatening. She told me that she would go to Miss Hollister with the story, and she added significantly that 'the story would lose nothing in the telling.' She did go to Hope with her tale — with one she had manufactured for the occasion; with one so repulsive in its conception and so revolting in its details, that even now when I think of it I stand appalled and almost incredulous, to think that a woman could falsely charge herself so

148 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

vilely. And Hope believed. Why should she not do so when a woman, face to face with her, charged herself with such a crime?

"Miss Hollister wrote me a letter and left it on the table in my room for me to find. In that letter, without intending to do so, she informed me quite plainly how I had been charged, and she told me with all candour that we must part. In fact she asked me to meet her that night in the counting-room of the bank — it was a private institution — when she should leave a reception she was to attend. She asked me to meet her there for that last interview, because she had determined never to exchange another word with me beneath her father's roof. She even told me that she would not again sit at the table with me, and that if I remained another night in the house, after that one, she would leave it and would remain away until I had gone.

"Countess, if you could read that letter, if you could have overheard the interview between Miss Hollister and me at the bank that night, you would perhaps comprehend how her father came to grossly misconstrue each written sentence, each spoken word. Henry Hollister's paternal eyes had seen that something troubled his daughter. He went to my room that evening before I arrived, thinking I was there. He found

the letter and read it. He read it believing all the while that Hope was referring to herself instead of to another woman. Crazy as I now believe by that self deception, he too went to the bank; he concealed himself in the private office with the result that he overheard our interview, which must have been even more ambiguous than the letter. Before it was ended he interrupted us. I had seized his daughter and was holding her in my arms when he came upon us. . . . He took her away, conducted her to the carriage, ordering me to remain where I was. . . . When he returned he was terrible in his anger and I could not understand. . . . It was then he told me who I was or rather who I was not; and then as his fury increased, he uttered words that made me understand at last.

"The tempest of rage that shook me when I did comprehend fully his meaning, and the horrible thing he had made himself believe, maddened me. It made an insane person of me. I seized him, choked him, threw him from me to the floor. . . . In falling his head struck an iron safe. . . . And he died."

Ashton paused and with a visible effort controlled himself.

"I left the bank. I wandered through the streets all that night and throughout the fol-

150 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

lowing day. I visited a barber and had my beard and moustache shaven. I changed my name to Cornell, and I cannot understand now why I did not give that name to Robert when he met me on the corner of St. James Street, unless it is that I had about decided to return to New York and give myself up for the crime I had committed. The remainder of the story you know. The recital of it has given me more pain than I can describe, and I sincerely hope that it has served the purpose for which I have intended it — that you are convinced of the error into which you and your servant have fallen because of my strange and unaccountable resemblance to your husband. Are you convinced, madam?"

He regarded her earnestly as he ceased speaking. Then when she raised her eyes to his, and he saw that they were as steadfast as ever, and that his recital had had no effect upon her other than to assure her that he was struggling under the effects of an hallucination, he started back in anger, finding it difficult to believe in his own senses.

"John," she said, rising and coming closer to him, "what could have put all of that awful history into your head? Did you dream all those things while you were ill, and have you carried that frightful sorrow around with you ever since you

recovered? I am your Hope, John. There is no such banker, or if there is, it is somebody you have met while you were still ill, and the remainder of the story you have imagined. Can you not see it so?"

"I regret, madam, that I cannot," he replied coldly. "With your permission, I will go."

"Not yet! Not yet!" she cried, extending one hand with a rapid gesture, and detaining him.

"I insist, madam, that I must go. I have already remained too long."

"Tell me, John, the address of the banker, Henry Hollister?"

"Why that?"

"You have been endeavouring to convince me that I am in error, and now it becomes my duty to convince you that it is you who err."

"Indeed! In what manner?"

"I will cable to New York at once. I will ascertain if there is a banker there, living, by that name; if so, if he ever had in his employ or ever knew such a person as John Ashton, and if that is also true, what was the manner of his leaving his employ."

"I cannot consent to it. The cable would find Hope. She would suffer anew. It cannot be done."

"You mistake me. I have a friend who re-

152 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

sides in New York. I will cable to her. She will make the inquiry for me at the bank. I will not spare words in the message. I will instruct her how to act in everything. Wait. I will write the message now and you shall approve of it before it goes. Robert will send it for us. If the reply confirms your story, I will believe. May I write it, John? May I?"

"Yes, write it if you must," he said, shrugging his shoulders and dropping into the chair. "It seems to be the only way to convince you, and I shall return to New York and surrender myself to the law, anyway. Write."

She hurried to the table where Ashton had written the letter of dictation for Robert, but he did not see her when she discovered it. She gave a sudden start, seized and folded it, and hastily thrust it out of sight. It was never seen again. Then she took up the pen and wrote.

"Listen," she said presently, rising and returning to the chair where Ashton was seated, "I will read the message to you; or do you prefer to read it for yourself?"

"No, read it."

"It is to the friend of whom I spoke. We were schoolmates and inseparable while she remained in this country. She married an American. Listen."

"I listen, madam."

"'Is Henry Hollister, banker' (giving the address) 'alive? Has he ever had in his employ or does he know John Ashton? When to both. Reply immediately full particulars. Vital importance. Strictly confidential.' Can you suggest anything to add to the message?"

"Nothing, madam."

"You are quite sure?"

"Quite so."

"Will you wait for me while I call Robert?"

"Yes."

Robert, anticipating that he was about to be summoned, stole from behind his curtain through the door into the hallway, and having permitted sufficient time to elapse after she rang the bell, reappeared.

When the countess had given him his instructions and he was gone, she returned to Ashton, who was standing in the middle of the floor.

"You will await the reply, here?" she asked anxiously.

"No, madam."

"You must, John, you must. It is only fair."

"It is impossible. Many hours must elapse before you can receive an answer, and I know already what it will be."

"You believe that you know. Don't go, John,

154 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

I pray you do not go until the reply comes. You do not know what it will be. You said you would consent that I should try this test."

"Shall I tell you what the reply will be?" he asked, smiling cynically.

"Yes," she replied, "tell me."

She only thought of gaining time so that she could conjure up some plan that would keep him there.

"Your reply will read something like this: 'Ashton murdered Hollister one year ago. Arrest him.' Good heaven, madam, I left my written confession on the desk when I went out from the counting-room that night. Do you think there could be any doubt concerning the reception accorded your friend when she goes there to inquire for me? Don't you realize that it will involve her, and do you wish to do that? There is such a thing as outfollying folly, and my manhood revolts against the thought of permitting myself longer to remain a party to it. I must go. When your reply comes, you will be convinced. If you suffer while you await its arrival, you will feel all the more respect for me because I did not remain to be a witness to your regret for this scene."

With a quick motion Lady Mercy stepped between Ashton and the door, and stood facing

him. A physiognomist might have discovered infinite possibilities in her countenance. Its startling beauty was greatly heightened by the excitement of the moment. Her eyes, always brilliant, gleamed with a new light which dazzled and held him, and he almost recoiled before the intensity of her gaze. She seemed to have grown taller and stronger in that brief instant, and by sheer force of will to have reached out and seized control of the situation.

"You must not—you shall not go!" she exclaimed, although her voice was not raised and her words were as calmly spoken as any that she had uttered during that unprecedented conversation. "No matter who you are; whether you are my husband, or the man whom you claim to be, you have no right to go out now, and you shall not go! You shall not go!"

"Madam—" he began, but she raised one arm and stopped him.

"You refer to your manhood," she said, attacking him on another point, and permitting the suggestion of a ring of scorn to permeate her tones; "do you think it is a manly thing to do, to leave me now in order that you may seek your own pleasure while I remain here to suffer alone? I think it is cowardly."

"Cowardly, madam?"

156 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

"Yes, cowardly. There is no other word to apply to it."

"I think it is cowardly for me to remain, when I know what the result will be — it would be an act of the most abject kind of cowardice. I must go."

"You cannot go unless you put me away from this door by force. I will not step aside to permit you to pass."

"In that case, madam, I shall feel compelled to do that very thing," he replied.

"What! You would do that?"

"If necessary, yes."

"Oh, God, is there nothing that will induce you to remain?"

"Nothing."

"Then do it," she said desperately. "I shall not stand aside. Use your man's brute strength against a woman's pleading, if you will. You shall leave this room in no other manner."

She stood facing him with her arms, half bare, thrown widely apart and covering the doorway, and when he took a step nearer to her, she did not move, nor did she turn her gaze from his.

She was breathing heavily, for deep down in her soul she believed this to be the one struggle of her life. There was no doubt in her mind;

only conviction, made the stronger by Ashton's determination to go.

Perhaps he *had* masqueraded in America as John Ashton. Perhaps he *had* secured a clerkship in a bank over there. Perhaps he *had* known Henry Hollister, and Hope, and had, during the tortuous vagaries of his unbalanced mind, learned to love her, or to think that he loved her. Perhaps, even, it was true that Henry Hollister was dead and that he had fallen by this man's hand. All this and more might be possible, still he was none the less her husband. That, she did not, could not doubt. It was with her a settled conviction; and if all those possibilities were true, was it not all the more vital that she should detain him there?

The cable might say that the banker was dead, and that he had been killed by John Ashton, but it certainly could not say that John Ashton had been known to them above a year. She would wait. She would know how to act when the message arrived, for in her heart she believed that word would come that Henry Hollister was still living, and that he did not, and never had known John Ashton.

The man was in a difficult position. He was determined that he would depart from the house before that cablegram could arrive, and yet facing

158 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

him was the unpleasant situation of being compelled to thrust aside, by force, the woman who opposed him with such vehemence that he could not doubt her sincerity. Indeed it was the very fact that he could not and did not doubt her which rendered him all the more determined to go.

"Perhaps it is possible for us to temporize," he said, presently, grasping at the only plan that presented itself. "Will you listen to a suggestion I have to make?"

"I will listen, John."

"If John were not my name," he replied, shrugging his shoulders, "I should resent your constant repetition of it. Under other circumstances I should be glad to have you so address me. This is my suggestion: I will return to my hotel and there await the arrival of Robert, whom you will send to me with whatever message, verbal or written, you care to despatch after you have heard from New York. Will that suffice, if I give you my word that I will do as I say?"

"Wait; if the message I send is for you to return here, will you do so?"

"No."

"Not even to hear my apologies, if apologies are necessary?"

"They will be unnecessary in any case."

" You do not reply. If I request you to return here, will you do so? "

" No."

" Then I will not consent. I demand as my right, that you remain here."

" And I insist that I go."

" You shall not go."

" I must go — I will go. Stand aside, Madam, and spare yourself and me the indignity you threaten."

" It is you who threaten; not I."

" Will you step aside? "

" No."

" I beg that you will do so."

" I refuse."

He regarded her earnestly for a moment, but there was no sign of faltering in her steady, unflinching eyes. Then he moved a pace nearer and stretched forth one hand until it rested on one of her uplifted arms.

" Beware!" she whispered; then, suddenly, before he could reply, she threw her arms around his neck, and with unnatural strength forced him back into the room over against the couch and down upon it, exerting all her weight and power to hold him there.

" Don't go! Don't go! For God's sake, don't go!" she moaned. " I will die if you go now!

160 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

Don't leave me. I pray, I beg, I entreat, remain! Remain until the message comes! Cannot you see that this is killing me? Don't go! Don't go! Oh, God, help me to keep him! God help me! God help me! God help *him* ! ”

Her voice died away in a moan. Her arms relaxed and fell from around his neck, and she sank back, mercifully unconscious.

Ashton straightened up. He placed her more comfortably on the couch, adjusted a cushion under her head, and with a tenderness such as he had not experienced since his parting with Hope, bent over and touched his lips to her forehead.

“ Poor child,” he murmured. “ I doubt if you have suffered more than I during this interview, but you will approve my course when you have read the message from across the sea.”

Then he turned away and went out of the house, down the street, and was soon lost in the shuttle-like crowd of a London thoroughfare.

CHAPTER XII

AT HERTFORD'S FAVOURITE CLUB

JOHN ASHTON's emotions when he departed from the residence of the Earls of Ashton and Cowingford, are indescribable. He was determined, but dazed. A chain of circumstances as inexplicable as they were remarkable had compelled him to discuss his own affairs with another, when he had utterly and for an entire year declined even to discuss them with himself. He had been forced into a betrayal of the incidents of that last night in New York; he had permitted a cablegram to be sent; he had voluntarily placed himself in a position from which there was no escape, and he had decided — irrevocably decided, he believed — to return to the city of his birth, to surrender to the law, and voluntarily to stand trial for the killing of his benefactor, Henry Hollister.

Nor was this all. The scenes of the preceding night, with its inexplicable entanglements and the interviews with old Robert and with Lady

162 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

Mercy, might have overwhelmed a stronger man than he was.

If he could have doubted her sincerity; if he could have believed that she was mad; if he could have accounted for her extraordinary belief in any logical way, or in any manner satisfactory to his own mind even though illogical in itself, he might have smiled on the whole thing and have gone on his way, reserving the incident only as a memory; but he could not do this. His only connected thought when he departed from the house was devout thankfulness that he had escaped, and firm determination that he would avoid every possibility of a second interview. It was his intention, vague though real, to return at once to his hotel — fortunately, he had not mentioned its name — and to remain in seclusion until the time for the sailing of the first steamer for New York.

Everything else was a jumble in his brain. He started out in the direction he wished to walk much as a drunken man reels toward home — instinctively.

He passed people on the street without seeing them. He crossed crowded thoroughfares, dodging in and out among the swarms of cabs and buses without realizing that he dodged, without knowing that many times he barely escaped col-

lision with horses and wheels, without hearing the angry and warning shouts of drivers, "bobbies" and pedestrians, who, less absorbed than himself, regarded personal welfare and physical immunity from harm as worthy of attention.

Not he. He might have been in Cairo, in Paris, on desert plains, or in a wilderness, and it would have been the same. His thoughts were in New York; his eyes saw only Hollister's bank, and Hope, and her father; his soul was wandering beyond the limit of its earthly sphere, and the power of locomotion alone seemed to have remained with his body.

He turned into Piccadilly, striding on as rapidly as the crowds on the street would permit him to do, jostling, colliding, and bumping his way through the throng, unheeding the angry gestures and rough words that often were hurled at him because of his clumsiness; and so arrived at Dover Street.

There, however, the throng of vehicles was so dense that he continued still farther on his way, and presently attempted to cross among the maze of horses and wheels so that he could turn into Albemarle Street, for he was stopping at Browne's, which has an entrance on both streets.

For a moment he hesitated, waiting for an opening through the crush, and at length, be-

lieving that he perceived one, he darted forward, leaped past one madly driven horse, dodged behind a cab, slipped, pitched forward like one who dives from a pier into the sea, and plunged headlong directly against the glistening shoulder of another rapidly moving animal.

Much sooner than could be expected — almost suddenly — traffic on that side of the street was suspended; carriages and cabs came to a halt as though a word of command had been given by one in authority.

A driver or two leaped to the ground, "bobbies" ran toward the scene, and the gentleman whose horses had caused the disaster stepped down and hurried forward to the spot where the prostrate man lay, directing his coachman to pull up to the curb and wait while he followed those who bore the stricken man to a chemist's.

The crowd which always collects at such scenes gathered there, and it was with difficulty that the gentleman made his way through it; but he succeeded, and presently stood near those who were bending over the injured man in the effort to determine if he still lived.

Presently he framed the question that was uppermost in his mind.

"No, he is not dead," replied the chemist, "but he is severely injured. Perhaps you may

know him, my lord," he continued, recognizing his questioner; "he is a gentleman."

"Indeed."

Without another word the owner of the carriage pressed forward and bent over the senseless form, but he started back instantly, apparently overwhelmed by what he saw.

"Good God!" he exclaimed. "It's Ashton. The Earl of Ashton and Cowingford, man! —

"Quick!" he continued authoritatively. "Get a litter of some kind. Haven't you a cot or a mattress here, my man? Get it. Officer, drive that crowd away from the door. Eh? Who is he? The Earl of Ashton and Cowin— Ah, doctor! I am glad that you happened to be near. It's Ashton — Jack Hertford. I didn't know that he was back — must have come last night or this morning — haven't seen or heard a word of him in a year or more. Will he live? Is it very bad, doctor?"

"Bad enough. Broken head and broken ribs. We can't move him far, but he must be got out of this before he revives, if he ever does. Where can we take him, my lord? Isn't there a club — "

"Yes — the Sachem — right around the corner — just the place — have some of these fellows carry that cot — Bobby, clear away that rabble — Doctor, the chemist here, will send for who-

166 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

ever you wish to help you. Come, now, men. Be awake! A minute may mean life or death to my best friend."

Thus it happened that John Ashton was carried, insensible, to one of those quiet little clubs with which London abounds. This particular one had in the past been a favourite resort of the Earl of Ashton and Cowingford, and here perhaps he was more intimately known than in any other place in England. And as though fate took a wicked delight in playing with the destiny of this self-condemned outcast, the man who believed that he recognized and took him there had been the most intimate friend and constant associate of the lost earl; by name, Lord Archie Quinlan.

The club was deserted at that time of day. Most of its members had not breakfasted when the accident occurred, but the news spread, as such news will, and it was not long before the clerk was besieged with inquiries concerning the condition of the Earl of Ashton.

To every question the same reply was given: "He is still unconscious, but the doctors do not regard the injury as fatal."

When everything had been done that could be done, but while the doctors were still struggling to overcome the coma into which the accident

had thrust their patient, Lord Archie descended to the lounging room, where he found a group of the earl's friends awaiting him.

"How did it happen?" "When did it happen?" "Where did it happen?" "What the devil were you thinking of, to run him down?" "When did he get back?" "Did you know that he was in town?" "Is he out of danger?" "Where is he hurt?" "Are any bones broken?" These were specimens of the questions that were hurled at him as he entered the room, and after he had replied to them as best he could, he said, suddenly:

"There is one question that I would like to ask, if anybody could answer it."

"What is it?" somebody inquired.

"Did the countess return with him? Somebody must go and tell her, you know."

"True enough! Look here, Archie, I have an idea," exclaimed another intimate friend of the earl.

"Let me have it, then; I confess that I am done up. Good God! If he should die, I would feel as though I had killed him."

Lord Archie turned away from them then, and walked to one of the windows, where he stood looking out upon the street, tapping the panes with his fingers and struggling manfully to con-

168 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

trol himself. They left him to himself, and presently he rejoined them, as calm and direct as ever.

"Well, Buxton, what is your idea?" he demanded.

"Why, Ashton's man — old Robert, you know. He's in town. I saw him on the street yesterday. We might send for him, and — er — it seems to me that — er — he'd be the best one to go to the countess; eh? If you should show up there, old man, she'd be frightened out of her seven senses before you said a word — she would, 'pon my soul, for you're as white as a ghost now. It's got to be done quick, too, for the thing is blazoned all over town already, and the news'll be fired at her like a shot out of a gun if we don't hurry."

"You're right, Bux. But we'll not send for him. I'll go fetch him myself."

"Pshaw, man! That won't do at all."

"Why not?"

"Why, you'd have to go to the house. The countess would see you, don't you know. She'd be sure to be at one of the windows, and all that. It always happens that way when one wishes to break bad news; eh? I mean when one is *obliged* to break bad news. We'll send one of the lads after Robert and have him here; eh? Don't you think that is better?"

"Perhaps so; yes."

"Good, then. You write a note to Robert —"

"Damn it, old chap, what do I want to write a note for?" interrupted Archie. "I'll take your idea and improve upon it. Here, my lad, come here. What is your name?"

"Mike, m'lud."

"Do you know where the Earl of Ashton and Cowingford resides?"

"Yes, m'lud."

"Well, go there as quickly as you can, ask for the earl's man Robert, and tell him that his master has met with an accident —"

"Say that he has sprained his ankle, or something like that, you know," broke in Sir Thomas Buxton.

"— and say that he has sprained his ankle," continued Archie, as if he had not heard the interruption. "Tell him it is nothing serious, and that he is not to alarm the countess on any —"

"That's just the best way to alarm her," interposed Buxton hastily.

"Be quiet, Bux. He is not to alarm the countess, but he is to tell her that the earl is injured, slightly injured, mind you, and — er — what the devil more *can* he say? Crandyl, you speak. You've been gaping like an owl for the last ten minutes."

170 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

Geoffrey Crandyl lowered himself an inch or two in his chair, blew a column of smoke toward the ceiling and drawled, lazily:

"Well, if I were Mike, and I were sent to see Robert, I should say, 'Please, sir, Mr. Robert, Lord Ashton wishes your attendance at the Sachem at once, and please, sir, tell my lady that he will bring a friend home to dinner with him.' Least said soonest mended, you know, Archie. It's all rot, you know, making up messages for this sort of thing. Just tell the truth."

"What?" exclaimed Buxton. "Do you mean to say that it is best to send word that Jack's nearly dead, and may be so before they can get here?"

"Yes, if that were the truth, but fortunately it isn't. Send word to what-d'ye-call-him, Robert, that Lord Ashton is here and wants him at once. That's enough, and it's the truth, too."

"You are right, Geoff," said Lord Archie, and so the boy was despatched.

It happened that faithful old Robert, having delivered the cable message to be forwarded, had hastened back to the house, fearful that his mistress might sorely need him in the crisis that was taking place in her life, and he arrived there only a few moments after the departure of John Ashton.

Hastening at once to the library, he found the countess still unconscious upon the sofa, and his guest departed.

For a moment he believed that she was dead, and he stood beside her, not daring to move, overwhelmed by the dread of what he might find if he searched for cause.

Her face was like wax, with just a faint suggestion of colour beneath the skin. She reclined quite at ease, as though she were sleeping, yet there was no gentle rise and fall of the lace which covered her bosom; there was no expansion and contraction of that white throat, no quiver of the eyelids, no fluttering of the long black lashes that fringed them. She was very still — so still that Robert was appalled.

That last frantic embrace that she had bestowed upon Ashton, and the scene which followed it, had torn away the fastenings at her neck, as it had loosed the ripples of dark hair, which now clustered pathetically around the white, still face, framing it, in that darkened room, in what seemed to be a mass of ebony, and rendering her appearance more deathlike than it really was.

Robert paused only for an instant, however. Then he fell upon his knees beside her and began chafing her hands, calling her by name, and en-

172 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

treating her with all the eloquence he possessed to open her eyes and to speak to him; to tell him that she was not dead. And thus he sat, stroking her hands and calling upon her, how long, he never knew — hours it seemed to him; until at last she sighed and breathed, and the old man knew that she was coming to herself again.

But it was some time longer before she was conscious of what was passing near her, and Robert waited. Even his master was forgotten during those moments of agony when he feared that his lady would never speak to him again, and now that consciousness was returning he could wait.

“John,” she murmured; then, slowly, she opened her eyes — great, sad, wondering eyes which did not comprehend what they looked upon.

She fixed them upon her faithful servant and held them there, staring idly while she tried to remember; and bit by bit it all came back; piece by piece it all returned to her, and the old man saw her tears gather and glide downward, although she manifested no other sign of weeping.

At last, after what seemed to be an interminable period of waiting, she spoke.

“Has he gone, Robert?” she asked, whispering the words.

"I fear so, my lady," was the heartbroken reply.

"When?"

"I do not know, my lady. He was not here when I returned."

Again she was silent a long time; and then:

"How long ago was that?"

"An hour, perhaps. I do not know."

She closed her eyes again, to think, but after several moments opened them again.

"We will follow him, Robert," she said.

"Follow him, my lady? How? We do not know where he has gone."

"Yes, Robert, I know. At least I know where he will go. He will take the first steamer that sails for New York. He almost told me as much as that. We must be passengers on the same — hark! What was that?"

Robert, too, had started at the sound, for it had not been heard in that house in a long time.

"It is the front door bell, my lady. Shall I attend to it?"

"Yes — yes. It may be that he has relented and returned. Go! Go quickly!" and she sprang from the couch and began pacing the floor while Robert hastened to reply to the summons.

The short time that he was away seemed endless, though it was in reality but two or three

minutes; but old as Robert was, he came back on a run, his face beaming, and his whole being convulsed with the joy of the news he brought.

"He is found! He is found!" cried Robert. "Oh, my lady! I believe that he has come to his senses at last!" and the old man plunged into a chair and sobbed with joy.

The countess started forward and seized him by the shoulder.

"What do you mean? Tell me!" she demanded.

"He has sent for me."

"Sent for — *you*?"

"Yes, my lady; from the Sachem. He is there. The boy said so. I was to come at once. Lord Ashton needed me. At the Sachem, my lady — the little club in Albemarle Street. He is there — there at the Sachem, with Lord Archie and Sir Thomas Buxton. Don't you understand? He has gone there — there with his friends, and they have done what we could not do; they have made him remember who he is. He is safe — safe — safe! He has remembered. I must go at once — at once; I may go?"

"Yes, — yes, Robert, go! Hasten! Return to me as soon as you can; or, if you are delayed, send a messenger to me. I shall —" but she ceased speaking, for Robert was gone.

"Has he really remembered?" she mused, "Or is it merely that he has chanced to encounter one or more of his friends, again denied his identity, and they have sent for Robert to assist them?"

She walked steadily up and down the library floor for nearly an hour, her brows contracted, her hands clenched behind her, her head bent forward, her whole attitude that of one who is confronted by a crisis which one false move will render fatal, and she was preparing to encounter that crisis proudly, bravely.

Presently she crossed the room and stood before a mirror, gazing long and intently into the clear, earnest, steadfast depths of her own honest eyes; peering by the aid of the glass into the utmost recesses of her own soul; estimating her own strength; invoking to her aid, by prayer and by concentration of mind, the power of God and every dormant force within her.

"No more sighing; no more weeping; no more fainting," she murmured to the reflection. "I am fighting for my life and I must not falter. I am struggling for him, and I must be strong and fearless. There shall be no hesitation now; all must be firm and unyielding. Pleading cannot win, force will. Argument will not avail, determination must prevail. He shall see me, not as I

176 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

am, but as I was. God is on my side and something tells me that all will be well."

She left the library, went up the stairs to her own apartments, and an hour later, when Robert returned, he found the shutters open, the house alight, and his mistress prepared for any emergency that might arise.

CHAPTER XIII

THE FANCY OF DELIRIUM

JOHN ASHTON, still unconscious, still shrouded in that awful coma from which the utmost efforts of the doctors had failed to rouse him, was conveyed to the house of the lost earl and laid upon his bed. The *Times* and *Telegraph* and other papers recounted at length the story of the accident, describing with considerable effect how he had been run down on the street by the horses of his best friend, carried to his favourite club, and finally taken to his home. They complimented the countess upon her remarkable fortitude in bearing up under the shock, for at the time of going to press it was by no means certain that the earl would live. And then — Heaven only knows how they obtained the news, and got it so exactly alike, too — they related how he had returned from the Continent the evening before he met with the disaster; had come back intending to open his town house for a short time only,

178 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

and then to retire to Hertford Hall for an indefinite period.

A short quotation from the *Times* will not be amiss, as bearing upon the method the world took to deceive itself, and to compel this utter stranger to assume the title and estates of one of the oldest titled families in the United Kingdom:

The Earl of Ashton and Cowingsford, just home again, was on his way to the Sachem Club at the time of the accident, for it is the favourite resort of his most intimate friends. He knew that it had long been the habit of Lord Archie Quinlan to breakfast there, and believed that he would encounter him.

The year that his Lordship has spent in travel with his bride has been as replete with happiness as the most earnest well wishers of the earl and his countess could desire, and it was his intention to complete the long holiday by having at Hertford Hall a selected few of his intimates, and in that way to atone for the long period of silence that has endured since the present countess became his bride.

Now he is stricken down. Death crouches close beside his couch awaiting an opportunity to leap upon him unawares, and to tear him away from those who love him; but there are those on the watch who will be unceasing in their vigilance.

The countess rarely leaves his bedside, and then

only when fatigue overcomes her, and she is forced away by her friends. By some extraordinary paradox she has infinite faith in his recovery, even when the eminent physicians in attendance upon his Lordship shake their wise heads in despair.

It is unnecessary to dwell further upon the period during which John Ashton was unconscious of all things. It extended into weeks, and often during that time despair entered the house only again to be expelled by hope; and at last he opened his eyes in the light of understanding — opened them, and saw, looking into his own, the great, wistful, but steadfast eyes of Lady Mercy. But he was too weak to utter any protest then, and he closed them again, wondering.

He was conscious that she bent over him and that her lips touched his forehead. He knew that her hand rested upon his brow, and somehow it gave him a sense of infinite relief, so that presently he slept again.

After that it was always the same. Each time he opened his eyes, it was to encounter hers, always tender, always wistful, but also unflinchingly direct, unfalteringly earnest, unqualifiedly determined, and he sighed and wondered, knowing that he must wait for an explanation of things that he could not understand.

180 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

"The cablegram — what of it?" he managed on one occasion to whisper.

"You must not think of that now," she replied. "Wait until you are stronger; then I will read it to you."

"You received — an answer? Tell me; I must know."

"Yes, I received a reply."

"Read it to me."

"Not now, John. When you are stronger I will read it to you."

"Read it to me now. I must know what it said."

She realized that it was best to comply with his request, so she sent to her apartments for the message and read it aloud.

"'Banker Hollister alive and well. Does not know John Ashton.' That is all, dear."

"All?" The room seemed to be swimming in chaos, so great was his amazement.

"Yes, that is all the message contains. You must not dwell upon these things now; wait until you are better and then we will discuss them."

"Does not know John Ashton? Does not know John Ashton?" murmured the sick man as if he could not believe the evidence of his senses.

"What does it mean? Alive! Thank God for

that! I thought I killed him. He lives. Thank God! But does not know John Ashton? What does it mean?"

"Listen to me, dear," said Lady Mercy, quietly, but firmly. "I shall not permit you to talk any more of this matter, but to set your mind at rest, I will tell you a little more if you will promise to dismiss the matter from your mind until you are well. Will you do that?"

"I will try."

"My friend has written to me since she sent the message —"

"Written to you? How long ago was that? How long have I been here?"

"Nearly three weeks. Not another word, now, or I will leave you. Will you obey me?"

"Yes."

"Nellie said she could not imagine why I wished such strange information, but nevertheless she went at once to procure it. She found Mr. Hollister. He received her at once. She describes him as a fine looking man past middle life, with smooth shaven face, bushy hair and brows, and piercing black eyes. Wait, I will get the letter and read to you from it, and then you must go to sleep again. Will you be patient while I go to my room?"

182 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

"No; tell me. It will be as well," he murmured. She took one of his hands between her own and stroked it gently while she continued:

"Mr. Hollister received her very kindly, and she told him she had called to inquire if he knew or ever had known a man named John Ashton, whereupon he shook his head and replied calmly that he knew no such person, following up the answer by inquiring why she asked him such a question. Nellie told him that a friend of hers in London had requested the information, and she read the message to him, omitting my name, of course."

"Ah! Well? What did he say then?"

"He replied: 'Inform your friend that I do not know and that I never have known a person whose name was John Ashton.' That is all, dear, and I must insist that you do not permit the matter to disturb you any more. When you are strong enough, you shall have the message and the letter to read, but you must not refer to the subject again. And now I am going to leave you, for you must rest. I fear that I have done wrong in permitting you to refer to it at all."

She bent over him, and for one instant her lips touched his; then, silently, she left the room.

But though John Ashton closed his eyes, he did not sleep. His mind kept busily at work in

the effort to unravel the tangled skein in which he had become involved.

"It is fate," he thought, "a conspiracy of fate. But Henry Hollister spoke the truth; he does not know and never has known a person whose name was John Ashton, for the name was never mine by any right. But he is not dead. He lives and I have one less burden to bear. I can see it all now. The blow only stunned; it did not kill. He recovered, he found my confession upon the table and destroyed it. Only Henry Hollister and I know about that scene in the bank. My sudden departure has been accounted for in some other way, and I have been repudiated. He does not know and never has known a person whose name was John Ashton. I never was John Ashton. Who am I? *Who am I?*"

His fever was returning. He thought he laughed aloud, but he made no sound that the nurse sitting at the far end of the room could hear.

"*Who am I — Who am I?* Perhaps I *am* that John Hertford. Perhaps I *am* the Earl of Ashton and Cowingford. Everybody has conspired to make me so; it *must be so*. Yes — yes, it must be so. They are right and I am wrong."

He thought — he believed that the words

184 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

were shouted aloud with his utmost strength. He imagined he was standing again in the library and that Robert and Lady Mercy and a throng of people were assembled there. He could see them. They were all pointing their fingers at him and shouting, yelling, screaming at him that he was John Ashton. He knew who he was. He was John Hertford, the lost Earl of Ashton, but he could not make them believe it.

They derided him, scoffed at him, scorned him, and in that fever of imagination which had taken possession of him he leaped upon them; he thrust them from him; some of them he struck with his fists; others he spat upon; oh, how he struggled, but he could not make them believe. He could not drive them from the room. They leered at him from every shadow, screeching, "John Ashton! John Ashton!" until the whole world rang with the denunciation, and in that room there was only one who believed him, and that was Sir Roderick. True he had been dead for centuries, but his eyes still lived, and they believed him. Yes, those wonderful eyes believed.

"John Ashton! John Ashton! John Ashton!" yelled the jeering crowd, which had now augmented to a multitude; and again he attacked them, fiercely, murderously.

"I am not John Ashton!" he shouted —

and he did shout it aloud this time, leaping from his bed and striking fiercely at his imaginary foes, mad with the fever that was consuming his brain.

The nurse sprang towards him. The countess, Robert, and one of the doctors ran into the room and attempted to seize him. He brushed them aside as though they were feathers, seeing only the scoffers, the deriders, the horde of friends who would not believe.

"I am not John Ashton! There is no such person as John Ashton — there never was such a man! He does not live! He never lived! Away, I say! Mock me — mock me, if you will, I am not John Ashton. What! You do not believe? Ask old Sir Roderick; he knows. Ask the countess; she knows. Everybody knows but you — everybody! I am not John Ashton! I never was John Ashton! There never was a John Ashton, so how could I be he?"

He broke into a wild laugh and again brushed his enemies aside, but the unnatural strength was wearing out.

"Who am I?" he continued, changing his tone, and fixing his eyes intently upon the countess who was nearest to him.

All the violence was gone now; only the fever remained. All that unnatural strength was

186 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

succeeded by weakness so great that he tottered where he stood and swayed as if he would fall, and the countess put her arms around him while she led him gently but firmly toward the bed.

"Who am I?" he repeated feebly. "You told me who I was. Tell me again. You know; Robert knows; everybody except myself knows who I am. Tell me who I am. I cannot remember. There is something wrong here that will not let me remember;" and he put one hand to his head in evident pain.

Gently she forced him back upon the bed and drew the covers over him; but when she would have stepped aside, he seized her hand and held it tightly in his own.

"Tell me," he said, "tell me who I am! I cannot remember."

"You are the Earl of Ashton, dear," she murmured, "but more than all else, you are my husband."

"Yes — yes, that is it; that is it; I am the Earl of Ashton. I will remember now. I will not forget again. Strange — strange — strange, that I should have forgotten. And you are Hope, are you not? You are Hope?"

"Yes, I am your hope. Will you be quiet, now, John?"

"Yes — yes, I will be quiet if you are Hope — my Hope. You said that, did you not? My Hope? Let me hold your hand and I will be very quiet. I am so tired; so tired. I have had a long tramp — such a long tramp. Yes — yes, I will rest now; but I am not John Ashton; you know that I am not John Ashton, do you not? Tell me!"

"Yes, I know that you are not John Ashton, dear."

She motioned to the others to leave the room, and when they were gone, she fell upon her knees beside the bed, and still holding his hand clasped between her own, she bowed her head upon his breast and prayed; and while she was praying, sleep crept silently into his brain and took possession; and the burden of her prayer was a thanksgiving to God that even in his fevered dementia he had remembered who he really was; and she prayed that when his understanding returned, he might still remember; that he might be permitted to awake from his slumber, master of the faculties that she believed he had lost.

So at last she rose from her position and stood beside him, looking down upon him with all the love of a woman's soul in her calm, unfaltering, steadfast gaze.

Presently she turned away and, calling the

188 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

nurse to his bedside, went silently to her own room, where behind closed doors she sank upon her knees again and prayed on, earnestly, fervently, beseechingly.

CHAPTER XIV

WHAT HAPPENED DURING CONVALESCENCE

THE relapse into which John Ashton had been thrown by his interview with Lady Mercy proved to be serious, so that for many days after the occurrence, his life was despaired of. But the crisis passed and hope returned to the weary and anxious hearts that were watching over him.

Days lengthened into weeks and weeks into nearly two months, however, before he was strong enough, propped by pillows, to sit up in bed, and respond to questions addressed to him; and as such questions had only to do with his physical condition, they were infrequent and unimportant so far as his convalescence was concerned.

Never, during that anxious time, was the subject that was uppermost in his thoughts referred to in any way by anybody.

The countess, who throughout his waking hours, was almost constantly by his side, avoided the subject as she would have avoided a deadly poison, and if by chance she detected an expres-

190 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

sion in his eyes which portended a return to it by himself, she escaped from the room without delay.

But, if she could have known, he was as determined to let the matter rest as she was. He thought of it often — indeed it was rarely absent from his mind, but he had decided not to refer to it again until he was once more possessed of sufficient strength to face the world alone.

What he would do when that time came, he had not decided. There was time enough for that, and meanwhile he could think and plan; and that was what he did, unceasingly, but never with that calm judgment and care which was an essential part of the character of the man.

His faculties, like his muscles, were weak and emaciated, incapable of deliberation and consecutive reasoning, and the nurses and doctors, and such others as entered his presence, "milked" and "lordshipped" him without interruption or protest on his part.

During the first days of returned consciousness, whenever the countess was within the range of his vision, his eyes never left her face. He watched her all the time with an intermixture of wonder and awe and reverence; and she met his gaze always with a smile of reassurance, and went about her duties with an unvarying calm and

assurance of possession which created an impassable barrier between her and argument or opposition.

He made no comment when she addressed him in endearing terms; he had not the strength, nor the energy, and he knew that opposition could do no good; and so, while he gradually became better and stronger, he permitted things to drift along as they were, without in the least realizing that he was day by day getting deeper and deeper within the maze of a tangle from which extrication would some day be next to impossible.

Lord Archie Quinlan called every day and sometimes oftener during the twenty-four hours; but he was not permitted to see the patient, although Ashton was told of his visits, his solicitude and his anxiety.

Other members of the Sachem, and of other clubs, where the earl had held membership, were also indefatigable in their inquiries, and in many of the clubs bulletins were posted every evening, stating with great minuteness the condition of the injured man.

Cards were left at, or sent to, the house by the hundreds; letters expressive of sympathy surfeited the post bag; messages came from abroad, and the whole world seemed to know that the

192 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

Earl of Ashton was at his London home battling with death.

But Ashton knew little of these things, and heard of them only when card, letter or message came from some one who had been an especial favourite with the earl — then, indeed, the countess mentioned the fact casually, in the hope that there would be some expression of appreciation on his part, but always without success.

One day she said to him, quite suddenly:

"John, dear, I have received such a lovely letter from Agnes Dunmore. She is in Egypt with her mother. Would you like me to read it to you?"

"No," he replied; "I do not care to hear it."

"You used to be so fond of her, John."

"Did I?" he smiled in reply, and made no further remark; and after that, the countess rarely reminded him of absent friends.

One day he asked for Robert, and when the old man, rejoiced by the summons, came to him, he said:

"Robert, do you remember telling me about Mr. Richard Hertford?"

"Certainly, your lordship," was the reply. "We talked about him the evening you came home. I remember it very well."

"Do you know his present address?"

"No, my lord."

"Is there any way in which you can find it out?"

"I fear not. His bankers might know it, but sometimes they are months at a time without news of him, my lord."

"I wish you would make the effort. If his address can be ascertained, I wish you to write to him at once and request him to return without delay. Will you attend to it?"

"Immediately, my lord."

"Very good. Let me know when it is done. That is all at present."

Robert repeated the conversation to his mistress.

She thought deeply before she replied; but at last she said:

"It is a good plan. I heartily wish Richard were here, but he dislikes being called home, and I greatly doubt if he will come, even if he receives the word."

"Refuse to come when his lordship is so ill?" exclaimed Robert, aghast.

Lady Mercy smiled.

"You forget, Robert, that Mr. Hertford is probably so far away that it will take months for a letter to get to him, and more months for him to get here. He would argue that the letter

194 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

had been so long on the way, and it would consume so much more time for him to reply to it in person, that his cousin would be either recovered, or — dead before he could get here — and he would not start. He would be rejoiced by the first condition and pained by the other, for we both know how fond he always was of the earl. He cares nothing for the title and he does not want the estates. No, he would not come, unless he had completed his tour, and in that case he will soon be at home, anyway. You may procure his address, if it is possible to do so, and I will write to him, leaving the matter so that he can act upon his own judgment when he receives the letter."

The address was, however, not procurable, and so Robert told Ashton when he was again called to the bedside; and the stricken man only sighed and closed his eyes.

Nearly three months had elapsed after the accident, before John Ashton was able to don his outer garments and sit by the window where he could look out upon the street, but after that he spent every day there, with Lady Mercy at his side. They conversed upon almost every subject which the ingenuity of either could suggest, save that one which was uppermost in the minds of each, affecting her with a terror un-

namable, lest he should still have preserved the hallucinations of the past, and him with reluctance against the time when it should be necessary to call up in her earnest eyes that expression of pain and horror he had once seen there.

He meant that the time should come when he would speak again, and to some purpose — but not yet — not yet. When he should be stronger; when he was well again — but not till then.

There was only one way in which he offended her now, and she noticed it with dismay, although she made no comment. He never used any name in addressing her. True, he did not call her madam, as he had done when they talked together the first time, for he noticed that when he did so during the first days of his convalescence, it pained her; so now, he used no form of address whatever; nor was it necessary, for when she was in the room she was constantly at his side, and whenever he raised his eyes her own warm, sympathetic glance met them.

Thus they drifted on, becoming more and more intimately acquainted, she, on her part, detecting many traits of character and disposition that were different from those possessed by the man she had married, but attributing them all to what she regarded as the natural cause; and he, on his part, learning more and more each day of

196 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

the beauty of her matchless character, of the infinite goodness of her soul and of the indomitable steadfastness of purpose which actuated her every impulse.

All the love she had bestowed upon her lost husband, she gave ten times over to the man upon whom she lavished such tender and unceasing care. It vibrated in every tone that she uttered; it glowed in every glance of her expressive eyes; it thrilled in every touch of her taper fingers; it dwelt in her presence and filled the room when she entered it — remained there when she was gone.

A human being may not plunge headforemost into the sea without becoming wet, nor can he become ingulfed in an ocean of love without feeling and realizing and at last succumbing to the irresistible element that surrounds him. Goliath, sleeping, may be chained down by pigmies. John Ashton, dormant, passive, submissive, could not escape the influence which closed tighter and more tightly around him with every hour of every day.

Whenever the countess entered the room, he was instantly aware of it, although he heard no sound. If she came behind him and reached out her hand to touch his brow, he knew the beginning of the act as well as the result of it, for he could

feel the increasing warmth that came with its nearer approach.

If, from a distant part of the room, she permitted her eyes to dwell upon him, he was instantly conscious of her gaze, and it soothed and quieted him; and when, hours at a time, she sat beside him with his hand clasped in hers, he experienced something akin to the rapture of a babe resting on its mother's breast — that absence of all emotion, which is the purest and holiest peace induced by the fulness of love.

If, by chance, she was absent from his side longer than was her habit, he became fretful, uneasy, anxious, impatient, and he would convince himself that the bright light through the window was oppressive, and order his chair turned so that he could watch the door through which she must appear when she came to him; and when she came, he would turn again toward the light, forgetting that it had annoyed him.

Thus, steadily he became stronger. The chair at the window, with every journey that he made between it and the bed, became less distant and easier of accomplishment, and he realized that the time was approaching when he must fulfil his destiny and go.

But the anticipation of it, instead of giving him joy, inspired him with dread — indefinable, unreasonable, relentless dread.

CHAPTER XV

WHICH OF TWO EVILS?

WHILE John Ashton was daily becoming stronger, his friends were more and more impatient to see him, and among the most persistent of these were Lord Archie Quinlan and Sir Thomas Buxton.

Geoffrey Crandyl contented himself with sending a short note in which he said that he kept close watch of the bulletins, but that he would not attempt to intrude himself upon his old friend until he was assured that his presence was desired. In the meantime, etc., etc.

Ashton, on the other hand, steadily resisted these advances and paid no heed to a message that Quinlan sent him, protesting that, unless he was soon received, he would be forced to the conclusion that his friend censured him for the accident, for which he was really in no way responsible.

One day, however, while he was smoking his cigar by the window, having arrived at that stage

in his recovery when he could move about the room, in which, however, he was still confined, Robert came to him with the information that Lord Archie was in the library and would not take No for an answer—in short, that he insisted upon seeing his friend, or upon being told that the acquaintance was no longer desired.

“Be it so, then,” he replied. “I do not wish to see him. I do not blame him for the accident; you may tell him that as strongly as you can put it; but I do not care to see him or anybody.”

Robert was in the act of turning sadly away to deliver the message, when they were both startled by the sudden appearance of Quinlan himself, who had followed Robert up the stairs and was standing in the open doorway.

“I’m here, Jack, anyway, whether you like it or not,” he said, advancing into the room. “You are obliged to see me for a moment. What in the world is the reason you are so offish? Surely you do not blame me for that unfortunate accident?”

“I certainly do not,” replied Ashton, coldly. “I alone am responsible for it.”

“Then why have you so persistently refused to see me?”

“I am not well, and I prefer to see nobody. That is the only reason.”

202 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

"There is worse, far worse to come. I must get well quickly and go away. I wish that I were strong enough to travel now; I would go to-night — but that is not to be thought of."

He leaned back and closed his eyes in the effort to plan out the form of leave taking he would adopt when the time came for his last interview with the countess. Methods innumerable suggested themselves to him, but one by one were thrust aside as impracticable, ineffectual, inconsistent, or impossible.

Lately — since he had been able to do so — he had read the papers exhaustively, and he knew that the whole world in which the Earl of Ashton and Covingford had lived and moved was familiar with the accident, its cause and its results. For the first time, a realization of the full effect that his sudden and unexplained departure would have upon the countess forced itself upon him — and he shuddered when he thought of it. At that moment, too, she entered the room for some article that she had left there, spoke cheerily to him and passed out again. Ashton sighed and then groaned aloud, for she had brought with her something that he had not faced before — a realization of the full effect that his sudden and unexplained departure would have upon himself.

He had not forgotten Hope Hollister. He thought of her daily — almost hourly — but he dwelt upon her memory as the recollection of one who was dead, while this new love had something within it that had never formed a component part of his love for Hope.

She had been the passion of his life; Mercy was its completeness. Hope had preempted the ardour of his youth and growing manhood; Mercy was the acme of all things desirable to attain. Hope was a memory; Mercy was a living, breathing, present fact. Hope had taught him the rudiments of love; Mercy completed the education. He saw in the present the fulfilment of every dream of the past. Through Hope, he had created an ideal; in Mercy that ideal existed.

The plain, sad truth came home to him with all its force, now that he thought of tearing himself away from the presence of that gentle nurse, that constant companion of his bedridden hours, that loving woman, and he realized that all the agony he had suffered by reason of his separation from Hope Hollister was only a drop in the bucket compared to the awful moment that would bring him face to face with eternal separation from Mercy Hertford, Countess of Ashton.

Still, full justice must be accorded to John Ashton, for it was not of himself that he thought;

204 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

it was of her, and the effect that his going would have upon her.

"This world of hers believes that I am her husband," he thought. "It knows, or thinks that it knows — and it is the same thing — that the earl is here. It believes that we, the countess and I, have been abroad during the past year — that we returned to London together. It knows nothing of the disappearance of the earl, or of the terrible trials through which the countess has passed. It expects me to appear — or, as that same world would term it, to reappear, and to assume all the prerogatives of Lord Ashton."

He hesitated, and shuddered; and then his mind plunged again into that chaos of circumstance which surrounded him on every side.

"Suppose that I permit things to drift on as they are until I am strong enough to travel, and then, at the first opportunity, steal away like a thief in the night, for ever, leaving only a letter for her to explain why I go; telling perhaps of my love for her; going over, for the second time, that history of the past which I would rather forget; reaffirming my true identity with all the force at my command; repudiating, utterly, all knowledge of the earl, of his past, his present, or his future; reasserting that I never in my life saw Robert until the moment when he met me

on the corner of St. James Street and Piccadilly, and mistook me for his master — that I never in my life saw her until I looked into her eyes through the holes that Robert had cut in the portrait of Sir Roderick. If I recite my duty to her, to the world in which she lives, to the friends of the lost earl, to the Hertford family, to Richard Herndon Hertford, the cousin who should succeed to the title — to God! What will it all avail? She will not believe. No, no; it would be better — far better, if I should go and say nothing. Better still, if I should go without denying the identity with which she and others have invested me, leaving behind me the impression that it is some other and unnamable reason that drives me hence. Better still, for her sake that I should drive a murderous knife into her tender heart, and so still it for ever, and end its sufferings for all time, and to eternity.

“ Then, if I go, what is the legacy that I leave behind me? I condemn her, for ever, to the very torture that for an entire year she has so heroically combated. I condemn her to a lifetime of regret, remorse, suffering, shame; for she will feel the remorse and imagine the shame even though there shall exist no cause for either. I drag the name that she has struggled to preserve inviolate through this trying time — I drag that name into

206 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

the realm of rebuke, I cover it with shame and ignominy, I destroy for ever the character of the Earl of Ashton, I estrange his friends, I hold him up for all time to censure and to contempt.

"She will never believe that I am not her husband. The world will never believe that I am not the Earl of Ashton and Cowingford. I cannot prove that I am not he. I have nothing except the baptismal right to the name that I have always borne, and Henry Hollister will deny me even that right.

"There are those in New York who would know me, but have I the right or is it my duty to call upon them to the chagrin and public shame of the woman who claims to be my wife?

"I cannot prove my identity. I cannot convince Mercy of the truth. I cannot convince this world of hers of its error. I cannot bring sorrow, perhaps death or insanity, upon the woman I love and who loves me with all her heart and soul and strength.

"Oh, God, in mercy make plain to me the path that I must tread! In pity, show me the way that I must go! In charity for all, invest me with the knowledge to choose between two great evils, that which is the less."

Tears of anguish oozed between his fingers as he bowed his head upon his hands.

CHAPTER XVI

THE QUALITY OF A SIN

JOHN ASHTON did not raise his head again for a long time, and when he did, the same doubt and perplexity were in his eyes and upon his face.

"Let me look upon the other side of the picture, in all its hideousness," he murmured; and then lapsed again into thought.

"Suppose that I were to remain? Suppose that I were to accept, passively, the decree that has been passed upon me? Suppose that I no longer deny that I am the Earl of Ashton and Cowingford? Suppose I usurp his prerogatives, his title, his estates, his personal effects — *his wife!*"

He rose from his chair and crossed the room; turned and retraced his steps to the chair again. His hands were clenched; his face was white and drawn; his lips moved, although he uttered no sound; his brows were wrinkled, and his eyes looked wild and haggard.

208 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

"What then?" he mused.

"That John Hertford the earl is dead, I verily believe — but the Earl of Ashton and Cowingford lives. He cannot die until the family becomes extinct. He lives in the being of that cousin Richard who is wandering, God knows where, in search of game and adventure. I would to God that he were here. Something tells me that he would listen to and believe me — that he alone could convince Mercy of her error.

"If I remain, the day of his return will come — what then? Will he also deceive himself as the others have done? Will he insist, even against my protestations, that I am the earl? Will he, too, force me into the retention of estates that are really his, and address me by a title that should belong to him? Or will his penetration be keener, clearer and truer, and when I go to him, as I surely will, if that time ever comes, and tell him the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth — what then? *What then?*"

Again he got upon his feet and strode across the floor, pausing at intervals while he walked, passing his hands in despair across his forehead, and sighing deeply.

"What is the quality of the sin that I commit if I remain? What is the quality of the sin that I commit if I go away?" he asked himself.

"There is no question here between right and wrong; it is a question between sin and sin. Shall I sin against Richard Hertford, or shall I sin against Mercy? Shall I steal from him a title for which he does not care, and estates which he neither values nor needs, or shall I steal from her, her happiness, her reason, perhaps her life?

"Shall I, in order that he may inherit that which he has never expected to attain, condemn her to misery? Shall I, in order that he may assume the title of earl, trample upon her pride and put an indelible stain upon the name of Hertford?

"If I remain, there is only one course for me to pursue, proud assumption of all that is expected of me, wilful murder of my own memory, secret marriage — remarriage, she will call it — with the countess. If I go, there is only one journey that I can take — suicide.

"Yes, that is it. It is the only way. That is the solution. I will kill myself," he cried aloud. "It shall be suicide. It is the only outlet that is left. She will forgive and forget. Her world will forget and therefore forgive.

"The *Times* will say that Lord Ashton, suffering from dementia induced by the unfortunate accident in Piccadilly, in a moment of madness took his own life. She will mourn for me but she

210 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

will not censure. She will grieve for me, but she will love again, remarry, and forget. Yes, yes! That is the solution. Suicide. I will kill myself. Ah!"

He had turned and found that Lady Mercy was standing not three paces away, and he knew that she had heard the words he had uttered aloud.

Her face was deathly white, and her eyes were wide with horror; but when she spoke, her words came calmly and distinctly.

"John," she said, "what is it I heard? What were you saying? I did not hear aright, did I?"

He went nearer and took one of her hands in his.

"Sit down, Mercy," he said tenderly.

It was the first time he had ever addressed her thus, and it brought a flush of pleasure to her cheeks — a flush that fled almost as soon as it appeared.

"The time has come when we must go over again that old subject that is your despair, but we will go over it calmly now. It shall be discussed without excitement, and as there is a God above us, whose blessing you deserve, you shall pass judgment upon me, and by your decision I will abide. Will you be calm and listen to me with care, and if you can, with confidence in my sincerity, even though you still regard

me as the victim of an hallucination. Will you do that? "

" Yes, John."

" Will the repetition of all that I have said to you on this subject influence you? If I again, with all the power at my command, deny that I am your husband, that I am the Earl of Ashton and Covingford — will you believe? "

" No, John, I will not believe. It is not a matter of belief with me, it is knowledge. I know who you are." She spoke calmly.

" Do you believe that I am in my right mind? "

" Yes."

" Then how do you make what you regard as a fact concerning my identity consistent with my denial, unless I am insane? "

" I believe that you are as sane as I am. Your denial of the fact is the result of forgetfulness induced by some illness or accident. The things that you believe that you remember are fruits of the imagination, resultant from the same condition or conditions. That is how they are consistent. And is there not proof positive in the cablegram I received from Nellie, supported by the letter she wrote later? The man whom you supposed you had killed is alive and well. He does not know and never did know a person by the name you claimed as your own."

212 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

"Is there nothing, Mercy, that I can say, that will convince you of the error into which you have fallen?"

"There is no error, and therefore there can be nothing sufficiently powerful to convince me that one exists. Robert recognized you. I recognized you. Your club friends recognized you. The world has recognized you."

"When Richard Hertford returns, if I desire to do so, will you go with me into his presence and hear me while I assure him that he is the rightful heir to the title and estates of Ashton and Cowingford?"

"No. I cannot prevent you from committing an act so foolish, if you are determined to do so, but I can and will refuse to be a party to it. John, dear John, why will you be so —"

"Hush, Mercy! Be calm. Remember that I have told you that I will abide by your decision. You have decided. I will not falter. But there are conditions upon which I must insist. Who pronounced the words that made you the wife of Lord John Hertford?"

"Sir Malcolm Douglass, the dean of the Church of the Annunciation."

"Do you know him personally? I inquire as a stranger, Mercy, not to give you pain."

"I believe you, John. Yes; he is a dear friend to us both."

"Will you send for him to come here, and will you permit me an hour alone with him, so that I can tell him the truth as I see it? And after that, if his religious scruples will permit him to act, will you let him marry us — as you would say, again, but as I say, will you let him utter the words that will make you my wife?"

"John! John!" she cried. "What is it you would force me to do? Go again to the altar with a man who is already my husband?"

"No, no, Mercy. Stand here in this room, if you will, with only those present whom you shall yourself select; Robert, perhaps, and one or two others. The dean will arrange for the license if he will consent to perform the ceremony — and he will keep the secret. It is the only way, Mercy. It must be that, or — nothing."

"Suicide?" she whispered.

"No, that is unnecessary now, since you overheard me; but it is that, or I must go away for ever."

"You will not leave me again, John! Promise me that you will not."

"If the dean bids me remain, I will obey him, and may God bless you and have mercy upon me."

214 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

" So be it, John. I will send for the dean. Are you strong enough to see him now? Shall I send for him at once? "

" Yes; at once, Mercy, at once."

CHAPTER XVII

THE HAND OF GOD

It was five o'clock in the afternoon when the dean, in response to the message sent to him by the countess, made his appearance at the house, and after half an hour passed in the library with the countess took his way to the room where John Ashton was awaiting him.

He was the personification of the ideal churchman, in face, in figure, in voice, and in demeanour. An enormously large man he was, but so well proportioned that his size did not impress you until you stood beside him; and there was benevolence and goodness in every line of his face.

There were dimples of humour near the corners of his mouth which did much to belie the rigid firmness of his lips, and he seemed to exude from his person, calmness, gentleness, firmness, and strength.

He entered the room alone, Ashton having insisted that there should be no accompanying introduction or announcement; and he came

216 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

forward with extended hand and hearty, resonant voice.

"Jack, my boy," he said cordially, "I should have been in to see you long ago, but I have just returned from the Continent. How are you? Almost well, eh?"

"Recovering rapidly, sir," replied Ashton. "Will you be seated?"

"Thank you; yes. It does me good to see you. The account that I read of your accident did not give much hope of your recovery, and now I find you almost as good as new. I am delighted."

"Did you see the countess?" asked Ashton, coming abruptly to the object of the call.

"Oh, yes" — cheerily — "we chatted together a few moments before I came up here. She is not looking well, Jack. You must make haste and get about again, or you will have to change places with her, you the nurse and she the invalid."

"Did she tell you that I especially desired your presence here?"

"Why, certainly. She said that in the note she sent me."

"Did she tell you why?"

"Partly — partly, Jack. I don't like confidences second hand, though. You had better

tell me yourself. I believe she intimated there is something wrong with your memory, and that you wish to discuss the matter with me."

The shrewd old churchman did not deem it necessary to tell Ashton that the countess had delivered the note to him in person, and that she had remained closeted with him in his study nearly an hour, during which she had related the whole, sad story of the past year; and that he had listened, at first in utter astonishment, then in dismay, and at last with entire conviction that her view of the case was the correct one.

He had known and loved them both from their infancy, and his sympathy was with her from the start. Still, he had gone to his interview with the earl with many misgivings at his heart, every one of which was scattered and forgotten the moment he entered the presence of John Ashton.

"Do you, sir, believe that I am John Hertford?" was the next question, and it was uttered in a tone that almost amounted to aggressiveness, for Ashton realized that he was playing his last card in the game of destiny that had been so strangely forced upon him.

The old dean did not at once reply. The astonishment depicted upon his face was not assumed; it was real, for the suddenness of the

218 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

question took him off his guard; but only for an instant.

Still, the time was sufficiently long to convince John Ashton that the countess had not anticipated him by pleading her own cause first. In this, as we know, he deceived himself, for deception in any form could comprise no part of the character of the venerable dean.

"Certainly — certainly, Jack," he replied quickly. "What else am I to believe?"

"Anything else, except that, sir."

"You will have to explain, my boy. I do not understand you," said the dean, calmly.

"I am not the man for whom you mistake me; that is all."

The words were uttered quietly, but firmly. There was no faltering in the tones that John Ashton employed. There was no excitement; but there was determination and emphasis unmistakable, and the dean did not immediately respond.

"The whole world seems to insist upon investing me with the title and estates of a man of whom I never heard until old Robert met me on the street," Ashton continued in the same quiet tone, keeping his eyes unflinchingly upon the face of the churchman. "I foolishly consented to come here with him — here to this house, not

knowing at the time that the countess was a self-incarcerated prisoner here; and from that moment a chain of circumstances, so marvellous and inexplicable that when I consider them I am utterly overwhelmed, has militated against my denial, and has seemed to force me, against my will, into the possession of the name, the estates, the title, and even the wife of another man. And now, I perceive that even you are a victim of the same self-deception. It is for the purpose of telling you this strange story that I have insisted upon your presence here. It is to advise with you concerning the dilemma that engulfs me, to discuss this matter fully as a man, as a friend to the earl and to the countess, and as a minister of God. You married them that morning more than a year ago; you have known each of them from their childhood; you have the power of God behind you in the work that you do, in the advice that you give, and in every act of your life. I beseech you now to ask that God whom we both worship, but who is nearer to you than to me, to imbue you with additional clearness of perception, so that He may direct you to lead me in the right way, for as you lead, I shall follow. I — ”

The old dean raised one hand to enjoin silence.

Then, calmly, he rose from his chair, raised

220 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

his grand old head until his eyes seemed to gaze through and beyond the ceiling of the room into the realms beyond, and after standing thus for a moment, silent, preoccupied, he said distinctly, clearly and in a deep voice which penetrated to the uttermost parts of the room:

“ Let us pray.”

Then he sank upon his knees beside the chair, clasped his hands together, bowed his head, and while John Ashton, awed by the simple sublimity of the act, buried his face in his hands and waited, the churchman began, in low, even tones, a supplication so earnest, so powerful, so reverential, that word by word it sank into and engraved itself upon the memory of the man who listened, and remained with him as long as life dwelt within his body.

He prayed as John Ashton had requested him to pray, that he, as a minister of God, might be directed in the right way — that he might be given the power to see things clearly, as they should be seen — that the mortal in whose interests he invoked the intervention of the Almighty might be governed and directed aright — that his memory might return to him so that he would see things clearly, and as they were — that the awful responsibility that rested upon him, the minister, as the adviser of this man and

this woman, might become a lasting blessing to each of them, and that forgiveness for all might be vouchsafed to them, should there be any error in their duty to God and towards man.

When, at last, the sound of his voice ceased, he rose from his knees, and reaching out his right hand, rested it for a moment upon the brow of his companion, while he said solemnly:

“John, the immutable power of God, the Almighty, is with us now. It has descended upon me and upon you, through me. Wisdom has not been given to me, but I shall bow to the inscrutable wisdom of our Father in heaven, knowing that I am right, in the advice that I shall give to you in this hour of your greatest need. I came here with a heavy heart, doubting my own power, and filled with misgivings regarding my right to assume the responsibility of this moment. Those doubts and those misgivings are gone. I feel within me something that is new, and strange — and real. God knoweth all things. Where our understanding falters, His continues. He doeth all things; He also doeth all things well. If He doeth all things, hath He not then imposed upon you these conditions from which you say you cannot escape?”

The dean ceased speaking, but after a pause that was almost imperceptible, he continued:

222 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

"There is, in all things that happen upon the earth, the hand of God. That hand is upon you now. If it rests heavily, and you stagger and falter beneath its weight, it is to make you stronger, better, greater, nobler. You and I and everybody are but instruments in His hands for the better modelling of some inscrutable design. Battle as you may, there is no escape from that guiding, directing hand. Whatever doubts remain in your heart, they will be quelled and stilled. Now, my son, if it is still your wish, I will listen to what you have to say."

Calmly, and with that same sublime dignity, the dean resumed his chair, and his eyes became kinder, gentler, as they rested upon the face of John Ashton and waited for him to speak.

Then, in that moment, John Ashton hesitated.

"Why should I repeat the story everybody refuses to believe? Why should I utter the name of Henry Hollister, in proof of my identity, when Henry Hollister has already declined to furnish that proof?" he asked himself. "Is it not fruitless to argue further? Hope Hollister might indeed furnish the proof, but have I the right to demand it of her? That past of mine, so far as it concerned her, is buried; shall I dare to resurrect it? Might she not also deny my identity, repudiate the tale that I would tell? And where am I to

turn if not to her? No, let the dead past bury its dead; let the living present partake of new life. If God doeth all things, and doeth all things well, as this good man says, I am, as he also says, but an instrument in His hands."

He raised his eyes again then, and said slowly:

"I will be guided by you. I can only repeat what I have already related to Mercy. The only man who can prove my identity denies that he ever knew me. Is it best that I should tell the story, or that I should try to forget it?"

"I think it is best, John, that it be forgotten. I will confide to you that Mercy has told me all. I already know the story that you would tell. Do not repeat it. Let it be forgotten."

"So be it, sir," murmured Ashton, solemnly. "Henceforth, I am John Hertford, — the Earl of Ashton and Cowingford, and may God have mercy upon us all."

"Amen! amen!" the dean responded, reverentially.

"Did Mercy tell you that I insist upon a wedding ceremony?" asked Ashton, presently.

"Yes; and I approve."

"You will perform it?"

"Certainly."

"And for her sake, without publicity?"

"Yes."

224 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

"When shall it be done?"

"At once. Before noon to-morrow. I will arrange everything for you. It is her request. I will come here at half-past ten with all preparations made. And now, John, do you not feel happier? Is there not a new peace in your heart?"

"I do not know. I cannot tell," Ashton replied, slowly. "There is one request that I would like to make — one supplication to you as a man."

"What is it, my son?"

"That you will be my friend, always, sir."

"I can promise you that, freely."

"You will remember this hour?"

"As long as God gives me life, I will not forget it," replied the dean, solemnly.

"Thank you. I will not detain you longer now. As you go out, will you see Mercy and tell her?"

"Yes."

Then John Ashton was left alone with his thoughts, but what they were has never been revealed.

There was no turning back now. It was too late for that. The deed was done. Henceforth he must live and act a lie. John Ashton must be buried from that hour. John Hertford must be resurrected and live.

The new earl smiled bitterly. There was no

joy for him in this deception. He could not repudiate the responsibility for the fraud he had decided to perpetrate. It rested upon him and upon him alone. He could not cast it off upon the shoulders of the good man who had advised with him.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE NEW LIFE

"I PRONOUNCE you man and wife."

The words were uttered solemnly, distinctly, impressively, nor was the blessing which followed the announcement less inspiring.

Dean Douglass ceased speaking, and a happy smile lighted up his face as he stepped forward and shook the groom warmly by the hand, at the same time imprinting a fatherly kiss upon the brow of the countess.

From that moment, John Ashton's health steadily improved. He became stronger with such rapidity that within a week after the ceremony he deemed himself quite well.

By common consent, neither he nor the countess referred to the subject that had so distressed them both, but which had affected them so differently. He became, without effort, and in every outward sense, the man whom everybody believed him to be; and she continued the loving, beautiful, trusting woman that she had always been.

He went about among the friends of the lost earl with entire composure and with perfect naturalness. At first, she endeavoured to be always with him, lest he should offend an old acquaintance by non-recognition, striving always to keep secret from the world the existence of that strange forgetfulness from which she believed he suffered. She coached him constantly, and he listened to and obeyed her in everything.

One day she showed him a photograph of a beautiful woman, about her own age.

"Do you know who it is, John?" she asked, after she deemed that he had studied it sufficiently long.

"No, dear," he replied, "I do not."

"I hoped — no, I believed that you would remember Agnes Dunmore," she said, and there was a ring of pain in her voice.

"Forgive me, Mercy," he replied, sadly, "I remember nobody. Would to God I could remember everything you wish. Tell me, dear, who is Agnes Dunmore?"

"She is a distant relative of yours; a far removed cousin, and at one time, long, very long ago, when you were children, you engaged yourselves to each other. She was Agnes Chisholm then. She married Lord Dunmore, who used to be Robert Crandyl. He died within the year.

228 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

Their place is Oakdale and it adjoins your seat in Hertford. They are coming here to-night. Her mother, Lady Babbington Chisholm, will be with her. I believe you have called her Aunty Bab since you were a boy, and do still. You will not forget? "

" No, Mercy, I will not forget."

Methods of this kind were her constant resource, and under her tutelage, the occasions were rare when he gave offence.

Among the men at the clubs and about town, Archie Quinlan was his constant companion, and for the genial, hearty young peer, the new earl conceived an honest and sincere affection.

The countess, who knew the true worth of her husband's friend, took him into her confidence one day, and told him much concerning the malady from which the earl suffered, but without going to the extent of explaining that it had included her, and also him. And after their talk Archie went straight to his friend and exclaimed:

" Look here, Jack, why in the world haven't you told me about this thing before? "

" What thing, Archie? " inquired the earl, raising his brows.

" Why, that you have somehow forgotten such a lot of things. Mercy has just told me about it.

By Jove, old chap, but I'd consider myself lucky if I could forget a lot of things that I don't care to remember. Do you know what I am going to do now? "

"No " — smilingly — "I haven't the least idea."

"I'm going to constitute myself mentor and post you. I'll just give you the pedigree of everybody we see approaching us — that is, everybody whom you ought to know. Look! There comes Bux. Bux, for short, you know. Ahem! Sir Thomas Buxton, baronet. Son of Sir Thomas Buxton deceased; grandson and great grandson several times over, of ditto; very proud of the ditto; about the only thing he is proud of, too, unless it is his pack of hounds and his roan hunter, Crank, which he believes can jump over the moon — and, egad, I believed it, too, the only time I ever tried to ride him. Don't on any account forget to inquire after Crank. You've ridden him to hounds often."

"Who is that with him? "

"Geoff Crandyl — another intimate; too lazy to breathe; third son of old Lord Dunmore by second wife; half brother-in-law to Agnes; one of the best fellows you ever knew, but so infernally lazy that he makes everybody tired — really. Funny that you forget him. I say, old

230 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

chap, was I, also, among the individuals of the forgotten past? "

" I am afraid you were, Archie."

" Devilish unkind, I call that. However, you remember me now, don't you? "

" Perfectly."

" Well, I suppose that will have to do. Now, tell me, when are you going down to the Hall? "

" Just as soon as it is consistent to do so."

" Shall you ask the same people that you always have? "

" That depends. I think, since you know something of my condition of mind, I will suggest that you consult with Mercy and make out the list between you. Then you can go over it with me and prepare me for the ordeal; eh? Will you do it? "

It was two months, however, before they were ready to go into the country, for there were social obligations to be fulfilled in town before departure could be thought of. At last, however, the time came, the London house was closed, and the earl, with his countess, their servants, and baggage, repaired to Hertford Hall, to be followed shortly by a selected few who had been chosen as their guests.

As the days and weeks and months came and went, the name of John Ashton faded into a

memory only. The new earl became more and more accustomed to his surroundings, his friends, and the numerous cares that devolved upon him by reason of the position he occupied.

His natural buoyancy of spirits returned to him in a large measure, although there were hours when he stole away by himself, lest the agony and doubt and dread that pursued him should be revealed to Lady Mercy. And he could not bear the thought of that.

But withal he was happy, and in outward seeming, much like the light hearted, fun loving, careless, genial John Ashton who had lived such a contented life in New York. And strangely enough, also much like the lost earl that these new friends had known and loved in the past.

There was one source of happiness in his life which consigned regret and remorse to utter oblivion, except at such moments when it would steal upon him unawares and carry him backward upon the wings of memory. It was his love for Lady Mercy. His eyes followed her whenever she was where they could rest upon her. When she was absent, he constantly listened for the sound of her approaching step. When she was beside him, he was blissfully happy.

Supreme content dwelt with them in the paradise they had created. They understood

232 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

each other without expressing their thoughts aloud. They each knew in advance, what the other was about to say. They dwelt together in perfect unity.

Often the new earl recalled the impressive words uttered by the dean that day when he had called him to his side to tell him the story of his life, and bit by bit he began to believe that his present surroundings was the working out of an immutable law in which he himself was only a passive instrument.

Regarding Richard Hertford, of whom he often thought as the man who by right should possess the title and estates which he enjoyed, there came no news; and at such times he resolved again that when he appeared he would tell him everything.

The season in the country came to a close, and they returned to London; and now John Ashton was so intrenched in his position as the earl, that its duties and obligations, its customs and requirements, became a matter of course, so that gradually he forgot that he was not what he seemed, and the intervals of retrospection became fewer, farther apart and less poignant.

True, now and then, he thought of John Ashton vaguely, as of one who was dead, but who seemed never to have possessed part or place with him.

He remembered Hope as one who had been loved and lost by that other being. He lived a different existence — a different life — he was another being, in body, in soul, in thought, in deed.

He knew that he was the centre of all things to two beings — his wife, who loved him with all the wealth of her great and passionate heart; to Robert, who worshipped him as one who is far above other men.

Dear old Robert! The same respectful, watchful, careful, considerate soul, with his fealty and his steadfastness shining in his eyes, who had grown younger and spryer since the return of his master, who anticipated every want, foresaw every desire, who worshipped the earl and adored the countess with an intensity indescribable.

In the old man's room, his Bible remained spread open every day at the same page, and every night, ere his white hairs touched the pillow, he read again the same chapter that had given him comfort that night of the earl's return.

While time drifted on, that incident, too, became a memory which dwelt only in the hearts of those who were concerned in it, but which never found utterance upon their lips; and when, on the anniversary of the day of that secret marriage performed by the dean, the countess gave birth

234 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

to a son, it was put aside for ever, except in prayers of thanksgiving and praise.

Still, Richard Hertford did not appear. Still, no word came from him to tell that he lived or had died. Even his bankers knew nothing concerning him, and it seemed to the new earl, who often pondered over his long absence, that the strange destiny that pursued him had also thrust aside the real heir, in order to confirm him more invulnerably in the place that he had usurped.

So, looking into the clear, calm eyes of his wife, and feeling the touch of her soft arms around him, he became, bit by bit, the victim of her great love — a happy man.

CHAPTER XIX

FEELING HIS WAY

THE steamship *Indian Empress* arrived at Liverpool on the fifth day of September, nearly six years after the remarkable meeting between John Ashton and old Robert at the corner of St. James Street and Piccadilly.

Among the passengers who immediately sought the railway station and took the fast express for London was a tall, bearded, powerfully built man, whose skin was tanned almost to the colour of a Hindu, and whose clear, piercing gray eyes seemed at a glance to comprehend everything they rested upon. And while he stood upon the station platform, waiting for the guard to assign him to a compartment he could occupy in solitary possession during the run to London, a close observer would have noticed that he took an almost eager interest in everything he saw, as if his eyes had for a long time been strangers to the scenes about him.

His baggage — and there was not much of it —

236 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

bore the initials "R. H. H." Under his left arm he carried a bundle of papers, just purchased, which he was reserving for diligent perusal in the quiet of his compartment.

"Seven years and two months to a day since I left England," he said aloud as the guard closed and locked the door after him.

Then he threw aside his coat, for the day was warm, filled and lighted a pipe that showed signs of much service, arranged himself comfortably among the cushions of his compartment, and commenced his inspection of the papers.

There were the *Times*, the *Telegraph*, the *Pall Mall Gazette*, the *Court Journal*, and, in fact, every London paper that could be procured at the stall, and what was strange concerning his inspection of them was, that instead of delving first for the general news, he turned at once to the society columns, scanning each item with the same close attention that the shears editor of an afternoon daily might have employed.

There was no evidence of enjoyment about him in the occupation, such as might have been expected in one who had been so long absent from his native land; instead, the expression of his face was stern and cold; and when, at last, his glance rested upon the following paragraph, fierceness glittered in his eyes, and his strong

hands involuntarily clutched the paper more tightly.

"It is announced that the Earl of Ashton and Cowingford, accompanied by the countess, their two children, and suite, have returned from Switzerland. They will depart immediately for Hertford Hall, to be followed shortly by a selected number of guests. Among those who are included in the invitations are," etc.

He carefully marked the item, and later, when he had scanned each one of the papers with the same care, cut it out, with others that he had discovered in the same way, placed them in his pocketbook, and hurled the remnants of his search through the window.

Then he leaned back among the cushions, closed his eyes, and appeared to be sleeping, but he was wide awake when the train rushed into the station in London.

That same hard, unyielding expression was upon his face, when later he entered his favourite club on Northumberland Avenue, and ordered such refreshments as he needed.

The hour was still early, for the lights were not yet in use, and while he waited he dashed off a note, called a messenger, and despatched it with instructions to observe the utmost haste, and to pursue the person to whom it was addressed

238 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

until found, if it took the bearer of the message all over the United Kingdom.

Richard Hertford was not one who uttered his thoughts aloud at any time, and just now he possessed an especial reason for thinking silently, but because afterwards his emotions at that time were revealed to a selected few, we are permitted to read them.

"Poor old Jack," he mused, "for your sake I must be careful in what I do. I must familiarize myself with everything that has occurred here during the seven years of my absence, before I act, or even speak; and when the blow falls, it must descend with crushing force—with irresistible power. Is it some hideous conspiracy, I wonder, and can Mercy Covington have had a hand in it! God! How many, many times I have asked myself that question since I escaped from that hell in Borneo and got back to partial civilization in India, only to learn of this new horror.

"Mercy—Mercy! Can the being whom I loved as a child and worshipped as a woman—can you, the only love of my life, whom silently I resigned to Jack for his happiness and yours—can you, who unknowingly exiled me from England and home—can you have sunk so low as this?"

It was remarkable that while he was the victim of such agonizing emotions, not a trace of their existence appeared upon his countenance. Outwardly, his face was as calm as ever, but it was the calmness of long study and continued effort. He possessed the stoicism of a Mayo Indian, whose expression never changes, in joy or in sorrow, in peace or in the grasp of the most excruciating pain.

"Poor old Jack!" he thought again. "You died in my arms; I buried you; I covered your face from earthly view for the last time, with these hands, and over your far away grave I uttered the only prayer that has passed my lips since I was a child. I knew you, Jack; I knew you beyond a doubt. You are dead, buried. How, then, can another have taken your place here? My God, how can it be?"

He remained there, buried in thought, and rarely raising his head, more than an hour. He was practically alone in the club, for it was at a time of day when the frequenters were absent, and thus far he had not encountered an acquaintance; and the fact that he was unlikely to do so had been his object in going there.

After the passing of the first hour, his eyes frequently sought the door, and at last, when another half hour had elapsed, his glance was

240 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

rewarded, for a figure entered the room and came rapidly toward him with extended hand and smiling, wondering face.

"Dick, old fellow!" cried the new-comer, "this is the grandest, best, happiest surprise I ever had in my life. Your note took me clean off my feet. Well, well, well! It is really you! We thought you were dead — feared that you were, at least. But why in the world did you want me to keep still about your arrival? By Jove, Dick, I am glad to see you again!"

All the time he was talking, he was shaking Richard Hertford's hand as though it were a pump handle, and the grasp was returned with equal cordiality, for there was an old time affection between these two that time nor distance could not efface or lessen.

"Sit down, Archie, and tell me all the news," said Hertford, quietly; "that is, if you have a few moments to spare."

"A few moments to spare? Well, I should say I have. I'd break an engagement with her Majesty the queen for the sake of a good chat with you. But tell you all the news of seven or eight years — which is it? — in a few minutes? Well, that is beyond me. Suppose you give me a little news yourself. Where in the world have you been all this time?"

"I have been a slave to a lot of niggers on the island of Borneo nearly three years of the time," replied Hertford, calmly.

"Good heavens! A what?"

"A prisoner and a slave. That is the truth, Archie. I escaped at last, and here I am. Not a soul knows that I am in London. I travelled incog. and —"

"But why? You should have wired, or done something. We'd have gone wild with delight at news from you; but you are here now, anyway."

"Yes, I am here now," replied Hertford, smiling. "You see, Archie, I know you fellows up at the Sachem. If you had known I was coming, you'd have had out a brass band or something equally monstrous, and no end of claptrap which I do not like. Now, tell me, how is everybody? Who among my friends is dead? Whom shall I miss when I appear among them again?"

"Not one, Dick, I verily believe; that is, nobody whom you care a rap about. How thoroughly well you are looking. Slavery must have agreed with you."

"I've had six months or more in which to pick up. Yes, I am well; very well."

Suddenly, and quite irrelevantly, Lord Archie Quinlan uttered a shout of laughter, so that his

242 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

companion stared at him in undisguised astonishment.

"What is it that is so funny?" he asked, presently.

"I was thinking of Jack. How surprised he will be."

Hertford gave an imperceptible start, and then said, quietly:

"Yes, I imagine he will be surprised." Then controlling himself admirably, he added: "Tell me about him, Archie."

"There isn't much to tell about him except that he is the happiest man this side of heaven. That's the truth, too. Why, it is six or seven years or thereabouts, since he and Mercy Covington were married, and one would think they were an engaged couple yet, with the wedding day set for to-morrow."

"They are happy, then? The earl and Lady Mercy?"

"Happy is no name for it. They're the shining example for the kingdom. You never saw anything like it. But you will have a chance to behold for yourself, for we're all going down to the Hall next week, for a month. By Jove! If we can only keep your presence in England a secret until then, and have you walk in upon them unannounced, won't there be a scene?"

Shall we try it? That is what passed through my mind when I laughed. Shall we try it? "

" Yes; it is just what I wish to do. Tell me, Archie, has the earl changed very much? "

" Who? The earl? Has Ashton changed? He has grown a little older, perhaps, like all the rest of us, but he's just the same old Jack. I suppose you have heard about the accident? "

" I haven't heard about anything. What accident? "

" Why, I ran over him in the street — in Piccadilly. Nearly killed him. Smashed his head and broke his ribs, and all that. I was terribly done up about it."

" When was that? When did it happen? "

" Let me see; it was in May. Yes, that's the time. He and Mercy had just returned from their honeymoon on the Continent. They took a whole year, but bless you, it was only the beginning. They have been keeping it up ever since, and will, I think, to the end of their days. Nobody knew they were back; they arrived only the night before, you know, and Jack was on his way to the Sachem to find me, or Bux, or somebody. I bowled him over like a ninepin, or rather my horses did. He was carried into a chemist's, and there I saw who it was. We took him around to the club, sent for old Robert, who

244 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

broke the news to Mercy, and then we took him home. It was nearly four months — no, about three — before he was out again."

"Indeed. Old Robert is still alive, then?"

"Very much alive. He's like a father to Jack. Follows him around like a shadow, with a beatific, far away sort of expression on his countenance that must be seen to be appreciated. I tell you, Dick, that is the happiest family in England."

"And Mercy? Is she well and happy, too? Quite herself, I mean?"

"Well and happy? Quite herself? You should see her. She was beautiful before — always, I suppose, but she is a dream now — the personification of bottled up joy and bliss. There is nothing like it anywhere else in the world. And the children —"

"Children?"

"Certainly. What is the matter with you? Isn't it quite natural that they should have children? It seems so to me."

Hertford decanted a glass of wine, swallowed it, and then said calmly:

"Tell me about them, Archie."

"There are two of them, a boy and a girl. Richard — your namesake, by the way, for he is called Richard Herndon — is three years old, and Agnes has been here about a year; I don't

know exactly. I'm not much on children. As a general thing, they are a nuisance, but somehow Ashton's children seem different from the common run. I suppose it is because they are his — and Mercy's; eh?"

Hertford did not reply. He was thinking deeply.

CHAPTER XX

A STRANGE THING UNDER THE SUN

THERE was a short pause in the conversation, during which Richard Hertford bent every power of his strong intellect upon the problem confronting him.

Long before the beginning of the interview with Lord Quinlan, he had decided to say and to do nothing regarding the knowledge he possessed concerning the real Earl of Ashton and Cowingford until he had made himself familiar with everything connected with the installation in his place of the man who at that moment possessed the title and estates.

He knew that it was of vital importance that he should know everything before he acted. He realized that he must play a part in the drama now being enacted at Hertford Hall, and which had been going on for four or five years — he did not know which. That he must appear to be equally deceived with the others was important, and he had schooled himself for the part.

The brief mention of the children in the paragraph he had read that morning had not attracted his attention; it is doubtful if he saw it, so that when Quinlan made mention of them, he was astounded.

The information already imparted by Archie amazed him in every way, for he could not understand how two people could be so perfectly happy as they were described to be, with the constant dread of a terrible exposure hanging over them. That Lady Mercy was a party to the deception, he did not doubt. He could not doubt it. How, indeed, could it be otherwise?

It was within the realm of possibility that a stranger might impose upon the credulity of the world at large, and convince it that he was somebody whom he really was not. Such things had been done before, and successfully done. Circumstances, personal likeness, a thousand different things united, might create the means for bringing about such a condition, if the director of it all were a man of resource, and had thoroughly prepared himself for the part he was to play.

Hertford realized this fully, even in the face of having to deceive such intimate friends as Quinlan and Buxton. But there were two persons who he believed could not be deceived — that is, if they

248 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

continued in their right minds. They were Lady Mercy and old Robert.

In his thoughts he dwelt upon Robert first. The man who had cared for the real earl since his babyhood. There was not a mark upon his body that he did not know. There was not a characteristic with which he was not familiar. To deceive old Robert would be almost as difficult as to deceive his wife. He could not believe that the old man had submitted to a bribe, and yet, how else could the matter be accounted for? Had he been induced to shut his eyes to the facts because of his love for Mercy and at her solicitation?

That might be; but that brought him back again to the most revolting part of the whole thing, and that was, the irrevocable decision — at least he believed it was irrevocable — that Mercy herself was not deceived; that she was *particeps criminis* in the matter.

“Deceive a wife?” he thought. “Deceive a woman like Mercy Covington? Impossible!”

He knew that the earl had disappeared from his wife's side within a few hours after the wedding, and he remembered now that he had no knowledge concerning the date upon which she had become the wife of his cousin; but nevertheless she was his wife — the woman who loved him. How

could she be deceived? But all this needs a word of explanation.

Richard Hertford was one day, nearly five years before the date of his interview with Archie Quinlan, idly strolling along the principal thoroughfare in the city of Buenos Ayres, Argentina, impatiently awaiting the time for the departure of a steamer on which he had taken passage for England.

For two years he had been wandering among the forests of Brazil, and other countries of South America, scaling the Andes and otherwise searching for excitement, adventure, and game. At last, he had tired of the amusement, and decided to return home, so he made his way to the nearest seaport, which proved to be Buenos Ayres.

He was engaged in inspecting the wares of a jeweller, displayed behind a plate glass window, when he felt somebody brush against him, and turning suddenly with a word of remonstrance upon his lips, had almost gasped with surprise upon beholding, in the supposed stranger, his cousin, John Hertford, Earl of Ashton.

On his own side the recognition was instantaneous; on the other there was no recognition at all — at least, not at once. In response to his exclamations of astonishment and pleasure at the meeting, the earl answered not a word, but

250 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

stood gazing at him with a perplexed expression upon his countenance that was at once strange and pathetic, and Hertford, perceiving that something extraordinary was the matter, linked his arm in the earl's and led him, a willing captive, to his hotel.

There, in his own room, away from eavesdroppers and observers, he had with great effort succeeded in drawing from the other a very little information which was subsequently supplemented by the perusal of some papers that he found in his cousin's possession; and among these, by a strange chance, was the marriage certificate of his union with Mercy Covington.

That the earl had met with a serious accident of some sort was evident, for aside from the condition of mind in which his cousin discovered him, there was a livid scar extending from the right cheek bone upwards through his hair to the crown of his head.

The earl was poorly dressed, destitute of money, and nearly starved when Richard Hertford encountered him. He had no recollection whatever concerning himself, only insisting that his name was Jack, but shook his head in hopeless despair when questioned further.

He seemed, however, to feel that he ought to know his cousin. Some faint spark of recollection,

almost extinguished, gave him the impression that he had found a friend, and he submitted willingly to the guidance and care of Richard Hertford.

On the day following this strange encounter, the steamer in which Hertford had taken passage for England was burned at the wharf, and impatient of delay, the more so now that he was anxious to get the earl to his home as speedily as possible, for better medical attendance and care, the traveller succeeded in securing berths in another vessel which was to sail on the same day, by way of India and the Suez Canal, touching at several ports on the voyage.

The time consumed would be manifestly greater, but the earl's physical condition seemed perfect, and Richard believed that during the voyage he could do much towards beginning the mental cure of the stricken man.

Subsequently, the ship on which they were passengers became disabled by the breaking of the shaft, and then they drifted aimlessly about for days and weeks until, at last, overtaken by a terrific storm, the vessel was cast, a hopeless wreck, upon an unknown coast.

There were a dozen survivors, among them Richard Hertford and his cousin, and all of them fell into the hands of the savages who inhabited

252 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

that wild and unfrequented part of the world. What became of the other ten survivors Hertford never knew, but by a fortunate chance, in the division of them among the savage tribes, the cousins remained together.

They were taken far inland by their captors, who made slaves of them, compelling them to perform the most menial kinds of labour, and subjecting them to daily tortures under which only the hardiest and strongest constitutions could hope to survive.

Under this severe treatment, the earl failed daily, until at last he was unable to get about at all; but as his bodily health declined, his mentality became stronger, so that slowly but surely recollection of many things returned to him.

The wreck had deprived them of everything they possessed except what they carried upon their persons, and even this had been taken from them by the natives, with their clothing, so that the papers which the earl had somehow preserved until after his meeting with Richard were also lost.

Richard Hertford did everything that man could do to preserve the life of his cousin. When the natives would have put him to death because he was no longer useful to them, he gladly took upon himself the labour of both in order that his

life might be spared. But he continued to grow weaker and weaker, while his brain became stronger and clearer, and at last he died.

After he was gone, when Richard had time to go over, with great care, all that had been revealed to him during those last days, he was forced to admit that it did not tell him half he wished to know — not half of all that he should know, and, reduced to a simple statement, it really did not amount to much.

Written out at length by Richard Hertford after his escape from the savages and while he was in Bombay, that part of it which is important here was this:

“ The Earl of Ashton and the Honourable Mercy Covington were married at the Church of the Annunciation, in London, on the (the exact date is forgotten) — day of May, 18—. The day was beautiful. There was a wedding breakfast at the residence of Lord Ashton, an informal reception during the day, and a grand function of the same sort in the evening. In the midst of it, Robert, Jack’s man, brought him a note, or a message, or something — it is not clear what it was, which induced the earl to leave his bride and go out of the house alone.

“ He did not remember why he went out, or who it was who called him, and from the moment

254 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

when he left his own door all recollection ceases, until he was too ill to be about, lying under a thatch roof beneath the scalding sun of Borneo. He died in my arms and was buried by me there, where he died, in Borneo. Prior to the date of his marriage, his memory was exact and correct, but from the instant that he received the blow which destroyed his mind, everything was blank. He remembered nothing of having been in Buenos Ayres, how he got there, how long he was there, or in fact anything whatever concerning his life after the blow fell upon him.

“That he had received a blow is proven by the fact that there was a livid scar extending from the right cheek bone upwards through the hair to the crown of his head. His hair covered the scar, but had not grown through it. From its appearance, I should say it was inflicted by a sharp pointed instrument, for example, such as longshoremen use in the pursuit of their occupation; in other words, an iron hook.”

That is all that has to do with the purposes of this history.

When Richard Hertford arrived in Bombay, he found that he was unacquainted with any of the officers stationed there — in short, that he knew nobody, and his first care, after providing himself with proper clothing, and — by means of

the cable, by which he communicated with his bankers — money, was to secure a file of London papers, and study them, and it so happened that one of the first things he saw was a mention of the doings of the Earl of Ashton and his beautiful wife, formerly the Honourable Mercy Covington.

For a time he would not believe the evidence of his own eyes, but when he came across announcements of like character again and yet again, he told himself that some monstrous thing had happened — some terrible thing which it was his duty, to the dead and the living alike, to investigate.

Again he had recourse to the cable. His bankers were instructed to furnish him with certain information at once, and requested to keep the fact of his reappearance in the world a close secret until he gave permission to reveal it. He gave his confidence to nobody, but he studied and thought, and wrote unceasingly; and he remained in Bombay, using only the cables for his source of information, until he was assured that there could be no doubt that another and a stranger had usurped the place that had belonged to his dead cousin, and now bore the title and enjoyed the estates which, by right, were his own.

Then, when he was satisfied that all that could be done at that distance was accomplished, when

256 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

his health was entirely recovered, and he felt in every way equal to the task before him, he took ship for home.

The long, almost endless hours consumed by that journey were hours of reflection and study to him.

The condition that he was obliged to face when he should arrive upon the scene was beyond his imagination. Try as he might, he could not understand its possibility, and he often wondered if he were not suffering from some hideous nightmare, some devilish hallucination which would fade away and be forgotten the moment he stepped foot upon English soil.

And now, after all he had gone through, in thought, in study, in wonder and in alarm, he confronted the most amazing condition of all, for here before him, in the city of London itself, was the closest and most intimate friend the earl had ever known, who calmly told him that the earl and the countess had just returned from their honeymoon on the Continent when a certain accident occurred; that they had been travelling together a year; that they were blissfully happy, and that Lord Ashton had changed, "not a bit."

CHAPTER XXI

ROBERT IS PUT ON THE RACK

RICHARD HERTFORD raised his eyes and asked:
"When are you going down to Hertford Hall, Archie?"

"Next week; during the early part of it," was the instant reply.

"I will go with you."

"Good. That is what I want you to do."

"But before I go, I wish I could have an interview with old Robert."

"Why?"

"Well, to make the surprise more complete, I would like to have a talk with him and make some arrangements. Robert loves me almost as well as he used to love Jack, you know."

"Yes, I know; as he used to love Jack; but the love that he used to bear his master was nothing to the adoration and worship that he gives him now."

"What do you mean? That he loves the earl better than he ever did?"

258 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

"Yes; it increases with his years. However, I do not think there will be any difficulty about your seeing him, for he is in town."

"In town? Didn't he go down with — with the family?"

"No. He was left behind for a few days to attend to some extra commissions I believe. I think you will find him at the house now. Shall I go around with you?"

"No. I know you have an engagement of some sort, and I will not detain you. Suppose you breakfast with me at Browne's at ten in the morning. Can you do that?"

"Certainly. I'd like to see Robert when he discovers you, though."

Richard only laughed. He did not invite Lord Archie to accompany him, and so presently the young man rose to take his leave, after reaffirming the agreement to breakfast together on the following morning.

Richard Hertford remained buried in thought for a long time after he was again alone, and the burden of his meditation was:

"What shall I say to Robert?"

No matter how much study he gave to the problem, however, he could not decide what was best to do, and at last, with a heavy sigh, he rose and prepared himself for the street,

having come to the conclusion that it would be best to be governed entirely by circumstances, and to permit events to shape themselves.

It was nine o'clock in the evening when he rang the bell at the side door of the London residence — the same door through which John Ashton had entered on that eventful night when the old servant discovered him — and the summons was immediately answered by the faithful servant, who was entirely alone, and who had just begun his preparations for bed.

Hertford stepped through the door into the entry without speaking, while Robert drew back to permit him to answer, for, coming back from the lighted room as he had, and emerging into the darkness of the entry, it was impossible for him to see the features of his caller with sufficient distinctness to recognize him — and Richard Hertford was certainly the last person in the world whom he at that moment expected to encounter.

This was as Richard had hoped it would be, for by that means he would be enabled to determine if the old man's intelligence had remained unimpaired sufficiently for him to recognize his voice in the darkness.

"A voice," he had argued to himself, "is the most difficult thing in the world to counterfeit,

260 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

and if Robert recognizes mine, and by it knows me at once, I will know that he could not have been deceived by the voice of this interloper who has stolen everything that poor Jack possessed."

He stepped through into the entry, closing the door behind him, thus enveloping them in darkness that was almost total, and then, while the old man waited in respectful silence, he spoke.

"Is the earl in town?" he asked indifferently; and he heard Robert utter a gasp of surprise, and knew that he started back with astonishment, so he continued: "I have heard he has returned from Switzerland, but that he has already gone to Hertford Hall."

"Who are you, sir?" exclaimed Robert in a low tone. "Pardon me, if you please, sir, but I—there was something about your voice which seemed familiar. Will you speak again, sir?"

"I have been absent a long time, and you may have forgotten me," said Hertford slowly; but the next instant he felt himself seized in an embrace that was almost frantic, while the old man cried out in a voice that was tremulous with agitation:

"Forgotten you? Forgotten Mr. Richard? No, no! I could not forget you. Thank God! Thank God! Oh, sir, forgive me. I could not restrain myself. We have despaired of your return. We have all feared that something dreadful had

happened to you, you have been away so long. But come in, come in, sir, where there is a light so that I can see your face. How delighted his lordship and my lady will be to see you again, sir — to welcome you home again. Come in, come in, Mr. Richard. Oh, sir, I am made ten years younger by this minute. They do not know at the Hall that you have returned? That is good. We will surprise them, and then my old eyes will see you and my lord together again. God is good to me, Mr. Richard, very good. Come in, come in."

Trembling with excitement, the old man led him into the same room to which he had conducted John Ashton long ago, clinging to him as if he feared that if he released his hold, the apparition — for such he almost feared it might turn out to be — would fly away and leave him.

But it was no apparition, as the next moment proved to his satisfaction, for beneath the bright lights of the room, the sturdy, athletic, magnificently proportioned figure of Richard Hertford proved to be very material.

"It is Mr. Richard! It is Mr. Richard!" cried Robert, nearly beside himself. "Sit down, sir, sit down. What can I get for you? A glass of wine? A cigar? In one moment."

He disappeared in spite of Richard's remon-

262 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

strance, and presently was back again bearing a tray upon which he had arranged everything that he could hastily secure, and then, while his visitor laughingly helped himself, he stood back, eagerly regarding him, with all his good old soul in his eyes.

"When did you arrive in town, Mr. Richard?" he asked at last.

"Only this evening, Robert," was the reply. "I saw Lord Archie, and he told me that you were here, so I decided to come and see you, and so get all the news from the best possible source; and you must have a lot to tell me, Robert, for I have not received a line concerning those I love since I went away, seven years ago."

"Seven years; seven years and two months, sir. You see, I remember. It is a very long time, Mr. Richard. Many things happen in seven years," and he cast his eyes downward as his thoughts went back to one year out of that seven, that had been a year of torture to himself and to one other whom he could have named.

However, that secret had been religiously kept between him and the countess, and he had promised her upon his faith in God that he would never reveal it to anybody; but he did not when he made the promise foresee, and he could not now imagine, how difficult the keeping of his

promise would one day prove to be. He did not anticipate the questions that he was on the point of being called upon to answer. He had never realized that he would have to utter lies — downright lies, in order to keep his word with Lady Mercy; but the time was at hand.

"Yes," said Hertford, "many things may happen in seven years, and it is to find out from a source that I know is absolutely truth itself, that I have come to you to ascertain just what has happened."

"Well, sir," said Robert, brightening again, "I can tell you all that has happened to us, in a very short time. There was the wedding of his lordship and my lady, and there are the children — two of them, Mr. Richard! and such good, beautiful children you never did see, and never can see elsewhere."

"I quite believe that, Robert, from your standpoint, at least."

"The first was a boy, sir — and such a boy! The very living image of my lord! and as like him as two peas! And my lord did not forget you, sir. No, indeed! Lady Ashton wished the boy to have her father's name, but he insisted that he should have yours, and have it he did. The earl insisted that he should have your name and no other."

264 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

"The devil he did!"

"Eh? Yes, sir. The viscount is past three, but he looks five he is so manly and brave. You will see in him the image of what his father was at his age, sir. And the little girl is Agnes, for Lady Agnes Dunmore. That was the wish of her ladyship. She is almost a year and a half old, Mr. Richard, and as beautiful as my lady herself, only I think she also favours the Hertfords more than she does the Covingtons."

"Lord Archie referred to an accident that happened to the earl, Robert," interposed Hertford. "What was it?"

"That was a year and one day after the wedding, sir," said Robert, turning away his head for an instant. "Lord Archie's horses knocked him down in Piccadilly. His head was hurt, and some of his ribs were broken; but he is all right now, though he was confined to his bed for a long time. It was three or four months before he was able to leave the house."

"Indeed! Who cared for him during that time, Robert?"

"Who? Why, my lady, sir. Who else would she permit to care for him? She rarely left his side, and she nearly wore herself out in her attendance upon him. But everybody is well

now, sir, and very happy. God has been very good to us all."

"Humph! Where was the countess when the accident happened?"

"Here, sir, in this house. He had just left her only a few moments before — the time that it takes to walk from here to the scene of the accident — Albemarle Street and Piccadilly."

"I understand that they had just returned from their honeymoon trip, Robert; is that so?"

"Yes, sir; just returned," said Robert, looking away again.

"When did they return? When did they arrive at this house?"

"Just the evening before, the earl came, sir."

"The earl came! Did not the countess come with him?"

"Certainly, sir. It is the same, is it not? They are never apart for more than an hour at a time."

Richard Hertford sighed. The complexity of affairs was getting to be more than he could master.

"Were you abroad with them, Robert?" was his next question.

"No, sir, I remained here."

266 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

"How was that? I thought that the earl always took you with him when he travelled?"

"I did not go with him at that time, sir. I remained here."

"Why was that, Robert?"

"I suppose he did not want me, sir."

"That is strange. Whom did he take?"

"I think, sir, that he did not take anybody at all."

"Do you mean to say that they travelled alone?"

"Yes, sir. I know that Lady Ashton did not have a maid, and I am quite sure that his lordship had no man with him."

Robert was becoming very uneasy under this close questioning, and he wondered at it without once imagining the true reason, for if he attributed any cause to it at all, it was to the interest that Richard Hertford felt in everything that had happened during the time of his absence. Nevertheless, the questions worried him; but he was a servant who was too well trained to express surprise, or to question his interrogator.

"Was not that a strange thing for them to do, Robert?" asked Hertford.

"Perhaps so, sir; I do not know."

"Was it the earl's wish or did the countess desire it?"

" I do not know, sir."

" What time did they start upon their journey?
What train did they take? "

" It was rather late in the evening, sir."

" They did go away that same night, eh? "

" Certainly, sir. May I refill your glass, Mr.
Richard? "

" Yes, if you like. Let me think a moment.
Did not Lord Archie say something about an
event which happened during the reception?
Oh, yes! My cousin was called out by something,
or somebody, was he not? "

" Yes, sir; but he was only called away for a
moment. The guests did not know about it."

" Was he absent from the house for a long
time, Robert, or did he return immediately? "

Poor Robert! Here was a question that he had
not anticipated, and he did not know how to
reply, so he sat staring at his companion,
speechless.

CHAPTER XXII

TWO SIDES TO A PICTURE

RICHARD HERTFORD pretended not to notice the perturbation that disturbed the old servant. It was not his policy to do so, but on the reply he believed a vital point depended. He perceived that Robert was astonished and dismayed by the questions, so he purposely uttered them as calmly and as indifferently as it was possible to do.

"Who was it that called him out?" he asked, presently, leaving the last question unanswered, but determining to return to it again.

"I do not know, sir."

"And was he out long?"

"I was trying to remember," murmured Robert, partially recovering himself as he recalled the fact that in deceiving this man he was acting under the specific orders of his mistress, and that his allegiance belonged to her and not to him. "It is so long ago that I am sure I cannot be exact about the time. I remember that he was gone so long that we became anxious."

"Ah! He did return, then?"

"Did return? Why, sir, what do you mean?"

It was Richard's turn to be somewhat dismayed now. Had he said too much? He feared so, for the moment, and therefore he repeated the question in another form.

"I mean," he said, "were the guests still here when he returned?"

"I think not, sir. I know that he did not see them again."

"Was not that a strange proceeding, Robert?"

The old man's eyes flashed indignantly, as he replied with deliberation:

"I have never presumed to question the conduct of the Earl of Ashton, sir."

"Forgive me, Robert. Of course you have not. You are such an old friend, that I forget that you are a servant. You saw the earl when he returned?"

"Certainly, sir. I was the first to see him." It was the absolute truth, as Robert understood the facts, even though it was misleading so far as Richard Hertford was concerned.

"How did he look? Had anything happened to him during his absence?"

"He did not tell me that anything had happened, sir."

"Did he talk with you then?"

"Why, yes, sir, I believe so. I don't suppose

270 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

my memory is as good as it was once, and I fear that I could not repeat the conversation. May I ask a question, Mr. Richard? "

"Certainly, Robert; certainly. What is it? "

"Why, sir, it seems strange — I beg your pardon — that you should be so interested about such matters, and I feared that something might have been said that had come to your ears, about the fact that the earl did not see his guests again that night. I only wished to ask if such is the case, and if it is, to beg that you will not repeat it to my lady."

"No, no, Robert. Something that Quinlan said put it into my head, I suppose. It really is not worth consideration."

"Well, sir, the earl complained of a headache that morning, while taking his bath. I remember it very well, and that evening it was announced in the drawing-room that he was not well, and wished to be excused. I think, sir, that he was anxious about something, but he did not tell me what it was. In fact, I had noticed for some days that something troubled him, but I ought not to mention it, sir, and I hope you will pardon me. I think it is the first time in my life that I — "

"Yes, yes, Robert. You are, of the best of servants, I know. My questions are to blame

for your uneasiness. Do you know where they travelled, while on their honeymoon? "

" No, sir."

" And they are very happy, now? "

" I never saw two people happier, sir."

" The earl is just like his old self, eh? "

" Yes indeed! " (Robert was on safe ground now.) " He will be so delighted to see you."

" I am sure of that. Quite sure. I will be none the less pleased when I am face to face with him. He has not changed at all, eh? "

" Not at all."

Richard Hertford was silent a moment, and then, in a tone that suggested that he had just recalled the fact, he said suddenly:

" I wonder if that old mark has worn away yet."

" What old mark do you mean, Mr. Richard? " asked Robert.

" He used to say," continued Hertford, musingly, and as if he had not heard Robert's question, " that when that mark disappeared, he would die. He was always superstitious about it, you know, because nobody seemed to know how it got there."

" Oh, yes, sir. I know now what you mean. That tattoo mark on his breast. I have often heard him say the same thing."

272 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

"It has not disappeared then?"

"No. It is quite plain yet, though much fainter than when he was a boy. It will never wear away, sir."

"Have you seen it lately?" exclaimed Richard, for the instant astonished out of his usual calm, for that was the one thing upon which he had depended, should all else fail, to prove that the present incumbent of the title of the Earl of Ashton and Cowingford was a fraud. And now Robert referred to it as though it were marked upon his person, where Richard was positive that it could not be. He had seen it upon the breast of the man who had died in Borneo. It was not possible that its counterpart could be on the breast of this stranger.

"Yes, sir," replied Robert. "I see it every day — that is, every morning when I lay out his clothes for him, and rub him down after his exercise with the clubs, and his cold plunge. He is just as particular about all that as he always was."

Hertford stared at Robert in dismay.

"Is this old man lying to me?" he asked himself. "It must be so. I will never believe that the man who at this moment bears the title of the Earl of Ashton wears the same mark as that upon the breast of my cousin who died in

my arms in Borneo. It cannot be. This alone convinces me that I am face to face with a monstrous conspiracy in which Robert Smithson is implicated as one of the parties. And if that is so, Mercy Covington must also be a party to it."

His questions ceased and he sat there thinking, forgetting where he was in the intensity of his concentration of mind upon the subject confronting him.

When he began the conversation with Robert, he was immediately convinced of the innocence of the old servant of any complicity in the fraud that had been perpetrated, but now he believed differently; and the more he thought of it, the stronger became his conviction that he was being deliberately deceived; and the change in his sentiments was due entirely to Robert's assertion that the tattooed heart was upon the breast of the man now at Hertford Hall.

"I must go down there and see for myself," he mused. "There is no other way. I, too, must pretend to accept this fellow, and I must keep up that pretence until the moment comes when I can unmask him. But will that moment ever come? I have nothing except my unsupported word to offer; how, then, can I hope to prove that my statements are correct? Certainly my word will not stand for a moment against the

274 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

assertions of the countess, particularly in such a matter as this. What could I, who have been seven years absent from England, know that can be proved to be better knowledge than that possessed by the Countess of Ashton and Cowingford? Nothing! If I should undertake to do such a thing, there would at once be a cry raised, that disappointed because of his marriage and the birth of an heir, I make the attempt to prove my case only in the hope of succeeding to the title myself. The whole world would laugh at me, and end by putting me in prison — or in a lunatic asylum.

“There is only one way — only one thing that offers any hope of success, as I see the conditions now, and that is, to marshal all my forces, and then, when they are sufficiently strong, confront the man himself with them, and so force a confession from him; and that confession cannot be in secret, for then it would avail nothing. There must be concealed listeners — men whose oaths will be unassailable.

“Well, then? What then? What do I gain by all this? The title? I do not want it. Its possession would be a nuisance and a bore. I do not want it. What else? The downfall of Mercy Covington, who, to my certain knowledge, is at this moment living with a man to whom she is not married, and is the mother of children who

have no legal existence? Shall I be the one to expose all this? I who have exiled myself from civilization because I loved her, and knowing that she loved my cousin Jack, went away that he might win her and make her happy? Shall I do this? Can I do it? My God, who can reply to that question for me? Certainly I cannot answer it for myself. Can I crush her to the earth, steal away her good name and destroy her for ever, even though she has sinned beyond redemption? Would that be evidence of my great love for her?

"She loves this man. I hear it on every side. Their happiness has been dinned into my ears by Quinlan and by Robert until I am convinced of its truth. Do I not owe the same duty to her love for him that I did to her love for Jack? And ought I not to protect, rather than to crush him, if I am consistent?

"And if she loves him, does she not love her children even more? Are they not more to her than all the world besides, and shall I manifest my love for her by destroying them as I might crush worms in my path? Is it just, and have I the right to take away their names, to deny to them legal existence? Shall I wantonly crush two innocent babes, and cast them forth upon the world, covered with shame — I who do not

276 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

want the title, who have no use for the estates? I, who love their mother? Shall I drag the name of Hertford in the dust and mire of a scandal such as this? Shall I render Jack's memory a byword, and shock the whole world with the history of his wife's crime? "

Robert had silently left the room during this interval of thought, and now Richard Hertford rose and with bowed head and clenched hands began pacing the floor.

"That is one side," he continued. "Let me look at the other; let me study the events, as in my imagination I can see them, one by one, chronologically:

"There is a wedding. The whole town is invited. The day passes; evening falls. The parlours are alight; perfume fills the air; music plays behind banks of flowers; guests throng the house. The groom and his bride wait in their allotted place to receive the congratulations of their friends; the first, happy beyond the dreams of heaven; the other, concealing the heart of a fiend beneath the smiling exterior of a beautiful and happy bride. The whole world — their world — stands spellbound at the spectacle of a pair so fortunately united, so appropriately matched, so happy in the possession of each other. The gates of heaven seem wide open before them;

the very air is filled with peace, and joy, and harmony, and love.

"Outside, in the dark, concealed by the shrubbery near the side door of the mansion, lurks a human figure, shrouded in the gloom. In face and in figure he is strangely like the groom. In costume, he is identical. In creating the likeness, whatever nature has failed to do, art has supplied. Outwardly they are the same, in face, in form, in figure, in feature, in voice, in motion — for it must all be so in order to deceive those who have been and are to be deceived — but inwardly they are as different as heaven and hell. Heaven reigns in the breast of one; hell lurks, and screams, and struggles in the heart of the other.

"His eyes glare through the window at the moving throng. Their owner knows that he will soon stand there; that it is now only a question of moments when the man who is now there will be lying stark and senseless upon his back, to be borne silently away into forgetfulness and oblivion. Everything has been planned to the most minute detail. Nothing is forgotten or neglected. Clock-work could not be more perfectly regulated.

"The agreed upon hour approaches. Some one appears at the door — some one from the inside. It is an old servant of the family — a man who has passed his life (and it has already

278 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

been a long one) in its service — a man, loved by his master, and loved so well that his aid alone in this monstrous conspiracy insures its success.

“He closes the door and returns inside, saying nothing. The opening and closing of it were signals, and upon them the devil outside acts.

“A moment later, he steps boldly forward, and concealing his face as best he can, rings the bell. It is answered, a note is passed in, with directions that it be given at once, and privately, to the groom.

“The same old servant receives it, and he carries it to the master who loves him and whom he is supposed to love, and gives it into his hands, knowing that it is the instrument that will condemn him to death — gives it to him smiling, knowing that it is a death warrant — follows him to the door, knowing that he is looking upon him for the last time, and that within the hour, another, and a stranger, will enter to take his place — gives it to him, and smiles and bows, rubs his hands complacently together, perhaps involuntarily pats his pocket, or raises his unwavering eyes to the bride for a glance of approval of the monstrous thing that he has done — goes with him to the door, still smiling, still patting his pocket, his heart a clod of coldness.

and wickedness before which Satan himself might blush with envy.

"He opens the door for his master, and the happy groom steps out into the darkness. The door closes, and the earl is alone, blinded by the obscurity he faces.

"Somebody approaches from behind, and the groom half turns to be met by a crushing blow before which he sinks down silent and lifeless. Blood streams from the wound in his head, but he is picked up and borne away through the gloom, and presently that lifeless, inanimate thing, that only a few short minutes before was the Earl of Ashton, a happy groom, surrounded by hundreds of friends who would have died to have saved him, is whirled away through the night, God alone knows whither.

"Back there on the doorstep stands a man, waiting. He is calm, composed, master of himself and of the situation. He wears the same smile that glowed upon his face before this horrible thing occurred, only it is more placid now. The worst part of the deed is done — that is, the most difficult part; the remainder is comparatively easy.

"He waits until the noise made by the wheels dies away in the distance. Perhaps he lights a match to discover if there are stains of blood upon

280 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

the doorstep, and seeing none, laughs softly. Presently he steps boldly forward and rings the bell, or taps upon the door. It opens, and he stands face to face with that same old servant — and they smile into each other's eyes . . . my God!"

For a moment Richard Hertford paused, overcome by the tragedy of his own thoughts.

"Can this picture that my mind paints be true?" he asked himself. "It comes to me like an inspiration. I will pursue it to the end.

"That old servant greets this man as though he were his lord, returned. He chides him gently because he has been so long absent. He leads him away through the corridors and rooms, to the one which until now was the groom's. There, he turns up the lights and regards him earnestly, studiously, and after satisfying himself thoroughly, announces that the make-up is perfect.

"He mentions the mark of the tattooer's needle, and is assured concerning that, and then announces that the guests are awaiting the return of the earl, and suggests that they go down at once; but here the courage of the interloper falters. He dare not face that throng of guests and intimate friends of the outraged earl. It is too soon. He refuses.

"'Go down and say that I am ill,' he says.

‘Tell them anything you please, only get rid of them all. Send the bride to me at once. All has gone well so far, but too much effrontery may ruin everything.’

“The servant obeys. The guests depart. The countess joins him. The lights are extinguished. The house is silent.

“Perhaps the guilty pair depart that night; perhaps they remain until another day. God only knows, and it does not matter. They are together; the earl is out of the way. The coronet belongs to them; their plans have succeeded. And somewhere, hurtling away through the darkness, is that senseless thing that was once a man, but which now must be a hopeless imbecile — a man without a name, forgotten by the world, and by himself; but these two give no thought to him. His day has passed — theirs has just begun.

“They go away together, alone. Even that old servant is left behind. They do not fear him. If he talks, there are asylums for the insane where he can be placed. If he should tell the awful story, it would be madness talking, not sanity.

“They go away alone, manless and maidless, the better to prepare for the ordeal of their return; and that preparation is perfect. Not a thing is

282 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

forgotten. A year of careful study provides for every emergency. Good God! Who would not become proficient under the tutelage of a beautiful fiend like Mercy Covington.

"The year passes — the student graduates. The two return as they departed, like thieves in the night; that same old servant waits to receive them.

"The night passes; morning dawns; then, that crime created earl walks abroad. He prefers to face the first ordeal alone, and he selects the favourite club of his predecessor, and fate, which doubtless intended to kill him, involuntarily assists him. He is knocked down in the street by the horses of the very man he intended first to deceive. He is carried to the club that he had intended visiting. That same old servant is sent for. The ingenuity of Satan wins again.

"This man is carried to this house. The partner of his crimes hangs over him. His life is despaired of, but he does not die. He was saved for me!

"That accident is a fruitful thing. It renders easy all that might otherwise have been difficult. There is nothing more to fear — nothing save one thing, a man; but that man is far away; he has not been heard from; he may be dead; it is hoped that he is dead; that man is Richard Hertford — myself.

"Almighty God watches over Richard Hertford and spares his life through perils such as no man ever faced before and lived to describe them. Almighty God directs through the labyrinth of distance the wandering steps of that poor forgotten imbecile that was once the Earl of Ashton and Cowingford, and in a far away corner of the world he encounters the one friend who in all the world is the only person left to recognize him.

"The ship for England burns at the wharf. The next one taken is hopelessly wrecked. The devil is still on the watch, and takes sly chances to delay the return. These two — one who knows so much and yet can tell nothing, and the other who could tell all things and dare all things, yet knows so little, — are cast from a trackless sea upon an uninviting coast, and are left there to perish.

"The stricken one, worn out by the awful hardships, succumbs to them and dies; the other, invigorated by the thought of the information that he will take home to the loved ones who are mourning the disappearance of the earl, escapes — is here.

"He returns to find the sorrowing wife; he discovers a fiend. He returns, hoping yet to win the woman he has loved; he finds her a polluted thing, a murderess, a shame to her sex, to the

284 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

world, to all mankind — a blot upon the face of the earth. He returns to find — this!

“That is the other side of the picture; shall I hesitate in the duty I have to perform? No! With God’s help, no! Man, whoever you are, I will not spare you! Woman, vile and loathsome as you are, so shall the world know you to be! Children, innocent though you are, hideous crime pollutes your young blood, and you shall not be spared.

“I swear it: I will crush you all, all. Sin shall not triumph because I once loved a woman. Justice shall obtain! The memory of Jack Hertford shall triumph! I will bring back his memory from that far away grave, and he shall stand before you all, your accuser, your judge, your destruction. I swear it!”

Through it all, Richard Hertford did not utter a word that might have been heard three feet away. Through it all, this strange, strong man preserved the inscrutable expression of his features. An observer would have thought him unmoved by the thoughts within; and when, at that moment, Robert reentered the room, he saw nothing out of the ordinary in his demeanour.

He began an apology for his absence, but Richard stopped him.

“It is no matter,” he said. “I was glad to

be alone for a moment. When do you go down to the Hall? "

" To-morrow, sir."

" On what train? "

" The first one, sir. At 6.30 in the morning."

" I will go with you."

" Ah, sir. That will be a pleasure."

"I will go with you. I dare not trust you alone, Robert. You love your master and your mistress so well, that in spite of my wish to surprise them, you would reveal my presence, eh? "

" My lady might discover that I had a secret, sir. I cannot hide things from her. She reads me like a book."

" So I imagine. I will meet you at the train, Robert. Good night."

" Must you go, sir? "

" Yes. Good night."

" Good night, sir; God bless you! "

" Hush, Robert! Let the blessing of God descend upon those who deserve it. Good night."

He hurried out of the house before Robert could open the door for him, and left the old man standing in his wondering way, gazing after his disappearing figure; and presently the faithful old fellow returned to his room and prepared for rest, little thinking of the horrible thing he had

286 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

become in the mind of the man who had just left his side.

Richard Hertford hurried back to his club and thence to Browne's, in Dover Street, where for hours after he had gone to his room he restlessly paced the floor, thinking and planning for the morrow, and becoming with each new plan more and more involved within the maze of those conditions he was called upon to face.

He did not forget to write a note to Archie Quinlan, telling of the change in his plans which would render the engagement for the morning impossible of fulfilment. He told him that his call upon Robert had decided him to hasten to Hertford Hall, and begged that he would follow him down on the afternoon train. He did not know why he asked that, but there was a feeling that he would like to have someone near at hand upon whom he could depend.

And then he threw himself down upon his bed, and slept.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE MEETING

DURING the years that had passed since that secret and eventful marriage at which Dean Douglass officiated, that grand old man had become a firm and constant friend of John Ashton.

Whenever the duties of his office would permit of leisure, he passed it with Lord and Lady Ashton, and the affection that sprang up between them became a matter of remark by all their friends. The subject that had been discussed between the new earl and the churchman just before the ceremony was never again alluded to and the serious side of it had long been dismissed from the dean's mind.

On this occasion, the earl and countess having just returned from an extended visit to Switzerland, a note had been at once despatched to the dean, asking that he cast all cares aside and join them without delay at Hertford Hall. It so happened that he embarked on board the same

288 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

train that carried Richard Hertford and Robert Smithson thither. They occupied different compartments, however, and neither the dean nor Richard knew of the presence of the other until the train stopped at the station, where a conveyance from the Hall was waiting for the dean and for Robert. Then they met each other face to face and the recognition was instantaneous and mutual.

"Richard Hertford!" cried the dean.

"Dean Douglass!" exclaimed Richard. Then they shook hands heartily, and together they entered the carriage.

"Are you going to the Hall?" inquired Richard, as soon as they were seated.

"Yes. I go there every chance I get. It is a second home to me since John and Mercy were married."

Richard stared at him speechless.

"Another victim of the deception," he thought.

"Truly, this man has left nothing undone to assure the success of his plans."

"Does Ashton know of your home coming?" asked the dean, presently.

"No. I am inflicting a surprise upon them."

"Excellent! I am glad that it is my good fortune to be present. We have talked about you every time we have met, and John has cabled all over the world for news of you."

"Indeed. When did he do that?"

"Just before he went to Switzerland. I was anxious to know if he had received any replies, and lo! here you are, in the same carriage with me, and I am literally taking you to him."

"Has Jack changed any in all these years?"

"Not a bit. Not a bit. He is just the same dear boy, and hardly a day older. In fact, he seems to have been growing younger lately. You have changed somewhat, Richard."

"Oh, yes. I have been through enough to change most men," was the reply, and then the thought: "Even the dean cannot see any change in him. God! What an actor this man must be."

"How is Mercy? Also unchanged?" was his next query.

"Yes; unless you would call access of beauty a change. Really, Richard, I regard her as the most beautiful woman I ever saw — and her soul is more perfect than her face."

Richard groaned inwardly, but he uttered no sound. Presently he said:

"Robert tells me that there are two lovely children."

"Robert is correct. Lovelier children never lived. Did he tell you that the boy is named for you?"

"Yes."

"It is true; but he is called Herndon, so that the names would not be confounded when you returned."

"Ah. Did they then expect me to return?"

"Most certainly. Others despaired of your life, but they never did. Only the last time I talked with Ashton, he said that he was positive you would return, alive and well; and we have all prayed that you would. Now, our prayers are answered. What joy there will be in the household to-night! How Mercy will cry out when she sees you! How John will seize upon you and almost sob with delight! I knew that John loved you, Richard, but I have seen him lately, actually suffering with anxiety, lest something had happened to you; and yet he has never given up hope."

"Humph!"

"Even the children have been taught to speak of you. They know your picture and when asked whom it represents, reply that it is Uncle Richard. What do you think of that?"

"I think it is very remarkable."

"Do you? I don't. I think it is very lovely. It should be very gratifying to you."

"Dean," said Richard, after a moment of silence, "did you not marry them?"

"Certainly. I thought you knew it."

"I suppose I did. Were you at the reception that night?"

"Yes."

"Did not something happen? Was not Jack called out, or was he not ill, or something of the kind?"

"Yes, I think he was, now that you speak of it. I had forgotten, though. Word came to us that he was not well, and wished to be excused. We all took our departure soon after."

"When did you see him again?"

"When he returned from his wedding tour — some while after it, in fact, for I was abroad at the time. As a matter of fact, after he was run down in Piccadilly by Archie Quinlan. Have you heard of that?"

"Yes; I have been told about it. His illness was not serious, then?"

"The accident. Yes —"

"No; at the time of the reception."

"No, I have been told that it was nothing more than a momentary indisposition. Ah, here we are."

As the carriage drew near to the broad veranda — the only modern thing about the ancient old pile — Richard Hertford perceived that there were five persons awaiting their approach, and one quick glance revealed to him who they were:

292 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

The man whom he had come there to unmask; the woman whom he had known in the past as Mercy Covington; the boy who, by the irony of fate, was his own namesake; the little girl who was named for a long ago sweetheart of the dead earl; and the nurse.

They saw and recognized him, also, as soon as the carriage came plainly into view.

Lady Mercy released her hold upon the hand of her son, and ran forward with a glad cry of welcome. John Ashton, who recognized the stranger instantly, because of his constant and careful study of photographs of him, caught his breath, hesitated the fractional part of a second, and then strode forward behind his wife, also wearing an expression of genuine pleasure; the boy hung back with drooping head, and the nurse, with the baby in her arms, remained immovable and placid.

Paradoxical as it may seem, John Ashton was really glad that Richard Hertford had appeared. He felt that the time had come when the ghost that had haunted him for years could be laid for ever, in one way or another, and which ever way that might prove to be, he would welcome its approach.

He had prepared for this meeting by years of study and rigorous schooling. He had fully

decided what he would do, and having decided, nothing could shake him from his purpose. He had determined — irrevocably determined — that he would make a full and complete confession to Richard Hertford. He had promised himself and his God that the revelation should be made at the very first moment when the opportunity occurred; that there should be no delay, no putting off, no procrastination of any sort; that Richard Hertford should hear the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth as soon as it might be possible to relate it to him after his arrival in England.

But he had also decided that his purpose should remain a secret in his own heart until it was expressed to the man himself, lest his wife and the good dean should advise against it, as he greatly feared they would do; and in order to carry out his intention exactly as he desired, he knew that he must permit no evidence of it to appear in his conduct at the moment of the first meeting between him and the man whom he had wronged.

It was because of that decision that he now approached Richard Hertford as if they were indeed cousins — as if he were in fact the one with whom the returned wanderer had played in childhood.

294 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

It was also the policy of Richard Hartford to appear to be deceived at that first meeting. He, too, had schooled himself for the part he was to play, and his calm, strong face exhibited nothing but pleasure when he seized the hand he would have crushed to a pulp had he followed the inclination of his heart. As it was, he shook it with every demonstration of genuine pleasure.

"Jack, old fellow!" he cried, with an effort that was as great as any he had ever made in his life, "everybody has told me that you were unchanged. By Jove, they were right. And Mercy!"

He turned and embraced her, and she clung to him, raising her face to his; and for the first time in her life she kissed him on the lips.

He shuddered when he felt that caress. It thrilled him to the utmost fibres of his being. It made him dizzy, and a wave of pallor swept over him, like faintness — like the near approach of death.

"Perhaps, after all, there is some excuse for this interloper," he thought quickly, as he drew away from her and turned hurriedly towards the children, lest the others should discover the pain in his face, and wonder at it. Strangely enough, it was of the betrayal of his love he

thought then, not of his purpose in being there. "With her for a temptress, what man's honour could she not kiss into obscurity?"

He seized upon young Richard and raised him in his arms.

"My namesake!" he exclaimed. "They told me truly when they said you were like your father, Richard."

"They tall me Herndon, tause your name's Richard, too," was the calm reply. "You is my Uncle Richard, an' I love 'oo, tause my papa said so."

"My God!" thought Hertford. "Have they taught this innocent child to plead their infamous cause with me? Shall I feel pity for them? Heaven help me to be firm!"

He put the boy down and took the baby from the arms of the nurse; but little Agnes was afraid of him and showed it. Her red lips quivered when she raised them for him to kiss, and she immediately extended her arms to the nurse, to be taken back again.

The welcome to the dean was no less cordial, and presently they all went into the house, Ashton leading the way.

"Richard," he said, when they were in the library, striving to render the utterance of the name as natural and unaffected as it would have

been had the real earl been there to pronounce it, "not a word yet about your adventures. We want to hear them all from the beginning to the end, and there is not time now. Robert will show you to your room, and when you have made yourself comfortable, you will find me here, awaiting you."

"All right, Jack. I will make myself at home, never fear," replied Hertford; and in thought he added: "Precisely what Jack would have said. Not a tone of the voice, not an expression of the face, not a mannerism different from what would have been his. I do not wonder that the world has been deceived. How boldly he plays his part, too. There is not the slightest indication of fear of me."

His heart hardened in that moment, more than it had done before. He vowed anew that he would not hesitate in his duty.

"You are looking so well, Richard," said Mercy as he turned to leave the room. "One might almost imagine that you had not been away at all, now that you are here again."

"I might say the same for you, Mercy, and for Jack, also," he returned; "and yet, it is over seven years since I left England. Tell me, are you happy?"

"So happy, Richard! So happy!"

"And there is not a cloud in your life? Nothing to regret?"

"Not one cloud! Not one regret! God has truly blessed me, and now that you are here, I am blessed anew."

"Not one cloud! Not one regret! My God, what does it mean?" Richard asked himself as he turned and left them.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE CONFESSION

THE dean did not need to be shown to his apartment, for he was almost as much at home at the Hall as he was in his own house in London, or upon his estates in Scotland. The "Dean's Room" was religiously set apart for his sole occupancy, and was never, even in his absence, given to another.

When he had changed his apparel, he descended the stairs and cautiously made his way out of the house. He wandered away among the trees to a retreat that he often sought when he wished to be alone, for he was not the one to intrude himself upon the reunion of these long separated friends, and he shrewdly guessed that he would not be missed before it was time for the midday meal.

The retreat that he sought was an old stone house of Moorish design, one story high, with a flat roof upon which flourished a miniature flower garden and grove. It was as old as the castle

itself, and was hidden away in the woods on the bank of a rushing brook, and had long been in disuse until John Ashton discovered it and fitted up the one room it contained.

To that room he always retreated when he wished to be alone, and it was kept locked against all intruders. But outside there was a flight of stone steps which led to the roof, and there the old dean kept a hammock concealed, so that when he desired solitude, he could withdraw it from its hiding place, and attach it to the posts that had been set beneath the bower of wistaria. Thus concealed from the view of everybody, he would doze, and dream, and prepare the milestones for those sermons which astounded and awed his London audiences.

Now he adjusted the hammock, and having fixed his herculean proportions comfortably within it and drawn a warm rug over his form, he straightway went to sleep.

Within the Hall, other things were happening.

Richard Hertford, having made what change he desired in his appearance, descended to the library, where he found Ashton and the countess awaiting him.

They chatted together, upon indifferent subjects for a few moments, and then Mercy, with a happy smile on her face, rose to go.

300 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

"I admit that I am selfish," she said demurely, "for I know that you two wish to be alone together, and here I have been inflicting myself upon you, knowing all the while that you both heartily wish I would go. Let me advise you to take a walk in the grounds while you talk over old times. The day is beautiful, and you will enjoy it more than sitting here; and John, one moment before you go out."

He followed her into the hallway, instantly, leaving Richard to suppose that it was her intention to warn this stranger again; and could he have heard her question and Ashton's reply, he would have been more than ever confirmed in his belief.

"John," she whispered, placing her hands upon his shoulders, and looking steadily up into his face, with moist, pathetic eyes, "do you remember yet?"

"Yes, Mercy," he replied, calmly. "I remember all that need be said or done."

"Thank God!" she murmured.

Then he kissed her lips and they separated.

"Richard," he said, reëntering the library, "do you recollect the old rookery, down by the brook?"

"Perfectly, Jack. It was my favorite resort when I was a boy; but if I am correct, you used to avoid the place."

The remark was quietly made, but there was a method in it, for in reality, the place was always a favourite with the dead earl. Ashton did not know that, but he answered naturally:

"I have always liked it. I have had it fitted up and use it as a den to which I retire in my bearish moods. Shall we go there?"

"Yes; I should like it of all things."

"Come then. I have a great deal to say to you, and you will have a great deal to say to me, I think. There we shall be undisturbed."

Richard might have confessed that he was surprised by this manner of address; instead, he forced a good imitation of a hearty laugh, as he replied:

"You speak as though we had mutual confessions to make, Jack. I hope it is nothing serious," and then before Ashton could reply, he added: "Would you not like to have Mercy with us?"

"No; not now. Are you ready?"

"Yes."

"Then come."

On their way to the rookery, the conversation was about the house, the grounds, the gardens, the shrubbery, the horses — anything except the subject upon which they were both thinking; and when Ashton unlocked the door and waited

302 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

for his companion to enter, the latter, with a light laugh, remarked:

"By Jove, you have made it comfortable here."

Ashton did not reply. He closed the door behind him, but did not lock it; still, the act had an unpleasant effect upon Richard, who for a moment wondered with surprise if the man whose guest he was had brought him there to murder him.

However, he shrugged his shoulders disdainfully, and throwing himself into a chair, lighted a cigar, and casting the match into the fireless grate, said calmly:

"It is cool and fine here; just the place for a secret confab. I envy you the possession of this, Jack, for to tell the truth, I have the devil's own time escaping from humanity."

"Is that the reason why you select the uttermost parts of the earth for your wanderings?" asked Ashton.

"Partly; not wholly."

He did not raise his eyes, and therefore he did not see the deathlike pallor that now whitened the face of John Ashton; if he had seen it he would have made no comment, for he, too, felt an oppressiveness in the air, and a presentiment that the ensuing half hour was to bring forth strange

developments; but even he had no idea how thoroughly strange and startling they were destined to be.

"Richard Hertford," began Ashton solemnly — so solemnly that his voice seemed altered, as though it had suddenly become deeper and stronger, and imbued with a ring of manhood undeniable; "you spoke the truth a moment ago, when you suggested that I was bringing you here for the purpose of making a confession, for that was and is my purpose. Richard Hertford, *you* are Lord Ashton, the Earl of Ashton and Cowingford — not I!"

Ashton had expected that Richard would leap to his feet in astonishment and unbelief, but in this he was deceived, for he did not move a muscle or alter the expression of his face in the slightest degree, as he replied, without a tremor in his voice, and without raising it by so much as half a tone:

"I know it. Go on."

"*You know it!*" exclaimed Ashton, for the instant surprised out of his calm. "You recognized the difference when you first saw me?"

"No. I knew it before I ever saw you. Go on."

"In that case, my lord, the task is easier for me," said Ashton slowly, his calmness renewed,

304 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

and his purpose more steadfast than ever. "I have feared that you would be as difficult to convince as were the others."

"What others?"

"Those whom I have struggled to convince of the truth. Mercy, old Robert, Dean Douglass."

"Do you mean that you have made the effort to convince them that you are not Lord Ashton?"

"Yes."

"I do not believe you."

Ashton's face became whiter still. His hands clutched the chair back, where they rested upon it; but he controlled himself, and murmured, as though he had not heard aright:

"You do not believe me?"

"No."

"It does not matter. You shall hear me to the end. Afterwards you shall be convinced that I have spoken the truth."

"I doubt it. Go on."

"I have, from the very first, felt that you would not be deceived, and before the fatal step was taken which placed me in the position I now occupy, I endeavoured with my utmost effort to get a trace of you, so that you might be communicated with."

"I do not believe you. Go on."

Again Ashton's lips tightened, and his face went whiter still.

"Have you faith in your own gentility?" he asked, coldly.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Admitting that you have no respect for me in my effort to tell you the truth, you should respect yourself sufficiently not to forget that you are a gentleman. It is not necessary constantly to reiterate your unbelief in my statements."

"In your presence I respect nothing, not even myself," replied Hertford coldly, "for I stoop lower than I ever did before, when I consent to listen to you. You are beneath contempt; I voluntarily place myself on the same level. Go on."

Ashton smiled bitterly. He was silent for a moment, and then he said slowly:

"I will not permit you to anger me. I believe that you are a just man, if an implacable one. In your position I am not sure that I would not be as despicable, for in your present attitude permit me to say that you are so."

Richard Hertford did not manifest a sign that he heard. His face remained as calm, as cold, and as hard as it was at the beginning of the conversation.

306 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

"Go on," he said; that was all.

"Am I assured that you will hear me through to the end, notwithstanding your doubts?" asked Ashton, after another short pause.

"Yes."

"Will you tell me how you knew that this fraud existed, even before you saw me?"

"No; I will tell you nothing."

"So be it. My story will surprise you, at least. Fortunately, the facts concerning it, or at least that part of them which interests you, are not dependent upon my own word, but can be proven by witnesses whose evidence you cannot doubt. I refer to Dean Douglass, to Lady Mercy, and to old Robert."

"I respect the dean, infinitely, at the present time; beware that you do not utter words that will endanger that respect. As for the others, I have, at present, nothing to say."

John Ashton did start back then, and his hands clenched the chair back still more tightly.

"Do you dare to refer to Lady Ashton in that manner?" he whispered, because his agitation and anger were too great for him to risk speaking aloud.

"I advise you to proceed with your narrative, and not to quibble over details," rejoined Hertford, deliberately.

Ashton bowed, controlled himself, and then in a low, even tone, began the recital of the story of his life.

"I was born," he said, "in the month of February — presumably between the eighth and twelfth," (mentioning the year), "where, I do not know. When I was about two weeks old, I was discovered on the doorstep of a mansion in the city of New York. The person who discovered me was a banker and a rich man, by name, Henry Hollister. He is still living, or was living only a short time ago. You see, therefore, that I was a foundling."

"It is in keeping with your future career. Go on."

"The man who found me gave me a name, and as that name is coincidental with everything that I have to say, I will repeat it. I was named John Cowingford Ashton; by that name I was baptized; with that name I grew to manhood, loved and cared for as a son, but made to believe that I was a nephew."

He paused for a moment, and then, as Richard Hertford made no sign or comment, he proceeded, and detail after detail, related the history of his life in New York from childhood to manhood. He told of the birth of Hope and how they had grown up together, more like brother and sister

308 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

than like cousins; he described the beginning of his career in the bank, and everything connected with that career, to the moment when he cast it behind him for ever, on that terrible night when he believed that he had been the means of the death of Henry Hollister.

He told of his love for Hope, omitting nothing, even explaining the cause of their separation; he described the night of terror, when he had wandered through the city streets, believing that he wore the brand of Cain upon his brow; his call at the barber shop; his sudden determination to leave the country for ever; his preparation, his sailing away under the name of John Cornell, and why he selected that name. He gave a detailed description of his wanderings from that moment, until his meeting with Robert, on the corner of St. James Street and Piccadilly; and through it all, he spoke in the calm, even tone that one might have employed in reading from a book, a history which did not concern, but only abstractly interested the narrator and the audience.

And all the while Richard Hertford remained immovably fixed in his chair, never changing his position, never altering the expression of his iron face, never commenting by a single word upon what he heard, as inscrutable as a sphinx, as

hard and relentless as the obsidian cliffs over which he had toiled during his wanderings among the Andes mountains.

"And now," said Ashton finally, "I come to the beginning of that part of my history which directly concerns you. You discover, by the date that I have given, that my encounter with Robert was precisely one year after the night I left the bank, and that also it was precisely one year after the disappearance of the earl, your cousin, whose name I have borne from that day to this."

Then, with even more graphic intensity than that with which it has already been portrayed upon these pages, he related his conversation with Robert on the street, his reasons for welcoming the advent of something to interest him and take him out of himself; he described in detail the interview and the incidents of that night; his subsequent consent to sleep in the house, believing that the countess was absent. He told of the events of the following morning, when Robert examined the tattooed figure on his breast, and exhibited the letter, written when the earl was a boy, to prove that he also was likewise marked.

He omitted nothing that happened at that time, describing his own indignation and determination to leave the house and the city at once — told

310 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

how he consented to go to the library, there, at Robert's dictation, to write a letter in the very words which formerly, on one occasion, had been employed by the earl—told how subsequently he had remembered the letter and had looked for it, and had not found it; but that he had forgotten it until it was too late to be of service—and then, minutely, he described his encounter with the eyes that glowed upon him through the holes cut in the portrait of old Sir Rodemick, the Crusader.

He omitted nothing of the effect they had had upon him, and how he discovered that he had been gazing into the eyes of a human being. He told how he had hurled the portrait across the room, thus discovering the presence of the countess, and almost word for word, and incident for incident, he related the interview that followed the discovery.

His attempt to escape from the house, and from the countess, he told in detail. How she had barred the way, and how at last he had left her, unconscious on the couch, and dashed away, only to be run down and nearly killed by the horses of Lord Quinlan, and that he had recovered consciousness only to find that he was again within the toils from which he had so vainly tried to escape, with the countess watching over him,

and with the whole world of London apprised of the intelligence that the Earl of Ashton and Cowingford was at home, injured, and likely to die.

And then he went through all that he suffered in mind at the time of his convalescence. He spoke of the call that Lord Quinlan made upon him; told how he had instructed Robert to make another effort to ascertain the address of Richard Hertford, and described that long session of reasoning with himself, at the end of which he had finally determined to assume the position that seemed by fate to be forced upon him, and to consent to become what he was not, provided the dean should also insist upon his doing so after he had heard the story — the real story of his life.

There, he paused for a moment, and for the first time during more than an hour, Richard Hertford spoke.

"It is a clever tale, well concocted," he said, "and even if I believed it, you are not less a scoundrel, for you consented to consider the wife of Lord Ashton as your own. But I will listen to the end. I promised myself that. If there is more to tell, go on."

"You mistake," returned Ashton, quietly, replying to the hideous accusation unmoved, knowing how false it was. "My wife and I

312 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

were married by Dean Douglass, in the library, where I first saw her."

"Indeed. The time of that marriage — if it really occurred — may be vital. My lost cousin was, I believe, alive when it took place. He was with me; he died in my arms; I buried him myself. You know now how I recognized in you the scoundrel that you are. You know now why I have no pity for you, and later, you will know why I do not believe the story you have told, and will not believe what there is yet to tell."

"My God!" muttered John Ashton, hoarsely; and he bowed his head in agony upon his breast. "When did Lord Ashton die?" he asked, in a broken voice.

"Lord Ashton lives. I am Lord Ashton."

"True. What was the date of the death of your cousin?"

"I will tell you that in my own good time, Mister Ashton."

"My God, how cruel you are!"

"You have not completed your tale. Go on."

CHAPTER XXV

A STIRRING OF DEEP PASSIONS

"THERE is not much more to tell," resumed John Ashton. "The dean came at my solicitation, but he would not permit me to relate the story as I have told it to you. Mercy had told him enough, he said. He spoke words to me that I will never forget; I could repeat them now, but they would not avail with you. He performed the ceremony in the library four years ago the twenty-ninth day of last month — August. Will you tell me now the date of your cousin's death?"

"If you will tell me first at what hour of the day your remarkable wedding took place."

"At half-past ten o'clock in the forenoon."

Richard Hertford, for the first time since the interview began, altered the expression of his face. He smiled grimly as he said with low toned emphasis:

"John Hertford, my cousin, died in my arms about two hours before sunset on the twenty-ninth day of August, four years ago; that is to

314 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

say, he died about half-past three o'clock in the afternoon of the day that you were married. Your children are nobodies; you are a criminal. Listen to *me*, now, for *I* have something to say."

He paused, and for a moment seemed to gloat upon the fearful agony suffered by his companion, for John Ashton stood staring at him, stupefied by the statement he had heard. It had benumbed his brain, already tried almost beyond endurance, and he did not fully comprehend it, even yet; and then Richard Hertford went on pitilessly:

"I believe part of your story," he said, "but I don't believe all of it. That part of it which deals with your imposition on the old dean, I credit. That part of it which refers to your imposition upon my cousin's friends, I credit. That part of it which relates to your appearance upon the streets of London at the time of the accident, I credit, and I also believe that the accident was an intervention of the devil to enable you the better to carry out your infamous schemes. That part of it which happened after that time, so far as it relates to the world in general, and not to Robert, or to — to her you call your wife — I credit, but I believe that everything else you have uttered here to-day is a lie."

Ashton only shuddered. Hertford continued:

"I believe that you knew Mercy Covington before she became Mussy Hertford. I believe that you were a pauper, an ex-convict, or something worse. I believe that you somehow won the love of Mercy Covington, who was already engaged to marry my cousin. I believe that you two, together, plotted and planned this hideous thing from its inception, and that your unaccountable resemblance to the earl, the likeness of your habits and characteristics, and the known talent of some obscure tattooer, was its incentive. I believe that Robert Smithson was your accomplice and hers. I believe that on the night of the wedding reception, when John Hertford disappeared, you waited outside, with other accomplices, and having enticed the bridegroom to your side, that you, or somebody in your employ—perhaps the very man who tattooed the heart upon your breast—struck him a murderous blow on his head with an iron hook, and that afterwards he somehow escaped you, and wandered away, an imbecile—for that is what he was when I discovered him."

Still Ashton said nothing, and Hertford rose from his chair and stood before him, with upraised hand, menacing in his attitude, grand in his rage, sublime in the self-control that he exerted.

"I believe," he continued, mercilessly, "that you entered that house after its true owner had been borne away senseless, and that Robert Smithson met you at the door, and conducted you to an isolated room, there to recover yourself. I believe that your courage failed you there and that you sent down word that you were ill and begged to be excused, so that the guests would depart sooner, and your partner in crime could go to you. I believe that you, accompanied by her, went away that night, through the darkness, taking no man or maid, and that you spent a year in the careful study of the parts you were to play, and in the manufacture and preparation of this story you have told. I believe that with hellish ingenuity, assisted by a wicked woman, you foresaw everything and arranged for everything — and even the accident may have been included in that plot, although it might have proved more serious than you had planned. It certainly happened opportunely and in the right place for your purposes. I believe that you foresaw the event of my return, and prepared for it with the same skill, fearing to wait for me to accuse you, lest I should have concealed witnesses when I did so — as I should have done had you not forestalled me. I believe — "

John Ashton raised his head slowly until his

eyes met those of the man before him, and they burned so fiercely that for an instant Richard Hertford hesitated; but only for an instant, for he again began the sentence:

"I believe that this woman, this hideous woman, was your — "

"Stop, Richard Hertford, or I will kill you where you stand!" breathed Ashton, bending forward and glaring upon this relentless man.

"Accuse me of what you will, but spare *her*, if you wish to live!"

"Bah! Can a worm grapple with a python? Don't talk to me of killing, lest your own carcass provide the corpse. I do not fear you. You have every reason to fear me; and your words are suggestive. They make me wonder why I do not kill *you*. I repeat: I believe that Mercy Covington, your — "

His words ended in a gasp, for the fingers of John Ashton were at his throat, choking off further utterance. His own flew up and seized upon his assailant. Neither man spoke. It was giant against giant; fury against fury; outraged despair against righteous rage.

For a moment only they were locked together, swaying where they stood, with furious eyes, with clenched teeth, distended nostrils, breathless; then Richard Hertford was lifted from his feet

318 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

and hurled, as though he were a child of puny strength, crashing against the wall, and John Ashton, instantly recovering from his rage, stood where they had struggled, waiting for him to rise.

Then, before he could speak, and ere the fallen man sought to rise, the door was flung ajar, and in the opening, with hands raised, and his grand old head towering over them, stood the magnificent form and awe-inspiring presence of Dean Douglass.

"Peace!" he said, solemnly. "Peace! God has sent me here!"

Ashton bowed his head in shame; Hertford rose slowly to his feet, and waited silently, so that they made the strange spectacle of two antagonists with murder in their hearts a moment since, standing side by side, humiliated by the presence of a superior being.

"Peace!" repeated the dean, drawing nearer to them, still with upraised hands, while his eyes flashed from one to the other, conquering them where they stood. "Would ye do murder here? Think ye one would benefit if the other expired? John, would you resent a false imputation against the fair name of your wife — false in the sight of God — by loading her with the greater shame that would have been enacted

here? Richard, where is your manhood, that you impugn the chastity and virtue of the woman you have always loved? Are ye madmen, both? Shame! Shame! Shame upon ye both!"

Awed, they remained silent, and presently the dean spoke on.

"John, Richard, listen to me; I address you both. The hand of God has been in this wonderful affair from the start. By His infinite goodness, He long ago made all that concerns you now plain to me. In His wisdom, He sent me here this day, installing me where I could hear all that has passed between you, for not a word that has been uttered in this room has escaped me. It is in my power, through His blessed goodness, to set your doubts at rest — to place you both where you belong — to do justice to every desire that burns, at this moment, in the heart of each. I will fulfil the mission that He has given me to perform. But there is another that must be understood first. Richard, tell me in what part of the world was it where you say John Hartford died?"

"In Borneo."

"Borneo! On the twenty-ninth day of August, four years ago, said you?"

"Yes."

320 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

"At a time which you say was two hours before sunset?"

"Yes."

"At what hour is sunset, there, on that date?"

"I do not know. It is rather early, for the sun is in the northern heavens."

"True. It sets then not later than five o'clock. What time, then, think you, is it here?"

Ashton gasped aloud. Hertford gazed upon the dean, astounded.

"It is between seven and eight hours earlier in the same day, so that, if the death of Lord Ashton had occurred as late as sunset, there would still have been some minutes to spare," continued the churchman, replying to his own question, "and, therefore, if he died between three and four o'clock in the afternoon, the ceremony that I performed between this man here and the Countess of Ashton took place five hours at least after the death of her former husband. Do you not both see the hand of God in this?"

Neither of the men replied. Both stood awed by the sudden revelation, so simply told; and both realized its unmistakable truth.

"Richard," continued the dean, "do you remember — can you recall the birthday of your cousin John who lies dead in Borneo? You were ten years old then."

A STIRRING OF DEEP PASSIONS 321

"Yes, sir, I remember it. I was here at the Hall."

"True. Do you remember that I was here also?"

"Yes; I recall it now that you mention it."

"Do you recall aught else concerning that day, Richard?"

"I remember that my uncle, the earl, was absent — in London, I think — and that he was sent for, and came several hours after John was born. He was accompanied by Robert."

"Precisely. Aught else?"

Richard shook his head doubtfully.

"Think!" commanded the dean. "Was there undue excitement about anything? Do you recall a commotion of any sort? Cannot you recall that I took you for a long walk that day, so long that you complained many times, and wondered why I kept you with me? And do you not remember that I went out again in the evening, carrying a lantern, and arrayed in a rubber coat, because rain was falling? Tired as you were, you wished to go with me, and cried because you could not. Do you remember that?"

"Yes, sir. I do remember it now."

"You never knew why I kept you with me all that day?"

"No."

322 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

"It was because your listening ears were everywhere, and I feared lest you should hear that which it was desirable to keep from you. You had haunted that region of the house where your cousin was born, every chance you could get. It was there where the secret that it was desirable to keep from you was located. That secret you shall now hear. It is a story that has often, alas, been repeated in the history of the world, and in the experiences of those who make enemies of men and women. I will not trespass upon your unbelief, Richard, for I have proof of all that I shall say."

"Do not, sir, do me the injustice to think that I will doubt you," said Richard, calmly.

"I will not. You loved me when you were a boy. I believe that you love me now. At least, you know that I am not one to deceive you."

"I do, sir."

"Then listen to what I have to tell you."

CHAPTER XXVI

THE KEY TO THE MYSTERY

"Your uncle and I were friends from childhood," began the dean. "We were classmates. Our friendship became stronger with advancing years. I was frequently a guest at this place, and it so happened that I was here at the time of the accouchement of Lady Hertford, which event took place ten or twelve days before it was anticipated. You were here, also, and much of the time with me."

"I remember it, sir."

"The physician who had been engaged to attend the countess had not arrived; a local physician, now dead, was called. It was because of his infamy, since in part atoned for, and I hope, forgiven, that the necessity of this moment arises. Lady Hertford gave birth to two children at that time, and one of those two, the elder, stands there, known to you as John Ashton, but known to me as Lord Ashton, the Earl of Ashton and Covingford."

324 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

The two men who listened stood gazing blankly before them, appalled. Neither spoke.

"Now," continued the dean, "be seated. I will tell you how I know this to be true." He waited until they were seated, and then, having also drawn up a chair so that it faced them, began again.

"The doctor, who was the direct cause of the events that followed, hated your uncle, the earl, and if I could admit that hate in any form were just, he had sufficient cause to cherish it in his heart. I will not tell you what that cause was; all of the persons concerned have gone before a higher tribunal, and we have no right to review their sins. But this man hated. He had sworn revenge — a pitiful word, but, in this case, a terrible one; but, years came and went and he did nothing.

"Your uncle — your father, John — having made all the restitution and atonement he could for the wrong he had done, believed at last that he had nothing to fear from the man who had sworn vengeance against him; but as events proved, that man only awaited opportunity; and at last it came, in the absence of the London physician — in the necessity for his presence at the bedside of the suffering countess; and it was I who summoned him.

"Immediately upon his arrival he sent for a nurse of his own selection, and expelled from the room the one who was in regular attendance, so that behind closed and locked doors those two were the only persons present when the children were born. I was here in this room awaiting news from the house; my friend, the father, was in London, and with him was Robert Smithson, who, had he been present, would have informed me at once of the strange proceeding. The expelled nurse did endeavour to do so, but I could not be found. The mother — your mother, John — was stupefied with chloroform, and never knew, thank God, that she gave birth to two boys instead of one.

"An hour or more before the arrival of the earl, while I was still sitting here, I heard my name pronounced, and discovered the physician standing in the open door.

" 'I have come to tell you the news,' he said, with a smile that I did not like. 'The countess has given birth to a son, both are doing well, and I will not be needed again before the arrival of the regular physician. Good day, sir, and be so kind as to inform the earl that I shall make no charge for my services. Our accounts are square at last.'

"He turned then and left me, and I hastened

326 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

to the house, disturbed by what he had said. I found in the room adjoining the chamber where the mother and her babe lay, intense excitement, wild commotion, general upheaval. The nurse who had been summoned by the doctor was writhing in agony upon the floor, servants and others were working over her, and she gave every evidence of having been poisoned.

"I took charge of things at once. I was the only person present who was capable of doing so. I sent the regular nurse to the countess at once, sent all but one of the other servants out of the room, and that one the housekeeper, who had been in the service of the family a long time, and together we worked over the stricken woman.

"I will not worry you with details. She partially recovered, and in doing so, she raved about the theft of a child. She accused the doctor of stealing a child — of poisoning her. But the baby was safe with its mother, and her mutterings were regarded as the fruit of an imagination overwrought by pain, and perhaps by a threat made by the doctor, and which he had not dared to carry out.

"Later in the day we knew that she had spoken the truth in her delirium, for a letter came to the earl from the physician revealing to him the awful truth.

"I will not repeat all of the letter now, though I have it in my possession; but it told how he had always intended to steal the first born of Lady Hertford; gloated upon the fact that fate had played into his hands in summoning him in attendance upon her now; how, now that there were two, he had taken the elder, foreseeing a more sinful revenge in the opportunity to rear it in sin and infamy in order that it might one day be induced to contest the title and estates with the other.

" 'I have marked them both for identification,' he wrote. 'You will find the mark upon the left breast of the child you retain with the figure 2, very small and faint beneath it. The mark on the child I have stolen is the same, except that the figure 1, likewise small and faint, is beneath it. My revenge shall extend to your sons and to your sons' sons.'

"Bare your breast, John Hertford, and let us see if the figure 1 is there."

"It is there, sir," replied the bewildered earl, tearing away his coat and waistcoat, and presently exposing to their view the tattooed heart with the figure 1 beneath it.

"I knew that it must be there," rejoined the dean, "for I have other proof that you are the

328 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

first born, or rather, the stolen child of your mother. I will return to that day.

"Nothing was left undone to capture the doctor. Scotland Yard was employed, and compelled, through the influence of the earl, to secrecy; but the records of the case are there, and may be reviewed. However, not a trace of the doctor could be discovered. He had disappeared utterly, having long planned for that moment.

"The servants still talked of the ravings of the nurse, and I kept you, Richard, away from the house in order that you might not hear them, for the life of the countess depended upon her ignorance of the awful truth. The poisoned nurse, to whom some unknown drug — afterwards supposed to be the juice of the loco weed — had been administered, was removed, became insane, and ultimately died without having recovered her reason. The search for the doctor was continued through years, and at last abandoned; the few who knew of the circumstances believing that both he and the child were dead. From the outside world the secret was religiously kept.

"Now, one thing more. When you sent for me, John, before your marriage to the countess, and would have told me the story that you have

related to Richard to-day, I would not hear it. I told you that Mercy had related the circumstances to me. She had done so, but she had not told all of them, believing, no doubt, that you would tell me everything, and that I would listen.

"She told me that while you were abroad some accident had happened, and that your memory had become impaired, your imaginations and hallucinations rampant. She did not tell me that you were not with her at that time, and I always supposed that you really started away together; for I never for a moment doubted that you were the same man to whom I had married her previously. She did tell me much of the story that she knew you believed to be true, but not that part of it which concerns your childhood and youth.

"So I never doubted that you were the John Hertford that I had known — until something more than six months ago, when I saw and recognized the man who stole you away — met him on the street in London — followed him to his home, and ultimately, before he died, which was some weeks after I discovered him, listened to his confession. From him I have every additional proof.

"He took you to New York, having succeeded

330 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

in catching a steamer which Scotland Yard deemed it impossible for him to embark upon in the time that was granted him. On the voyage he tired of you and decided that your loss to your parents was sufficient revenge. In New York he abandoned you, as he afterwards learned, on the steps of a house where a man named Henry Hollister resided. Then for the second time, that name impressed me as being familiar, and at last I remembered, and by searching old records proved, that an American by that name had been a classmate of your father's and mine at Oxford.

"This doctor lived in New York in misery; he watched you grow up in luxury, and he described to me in detail your career and your subsequent disappearance at the very time when he had come to the determination to go to you and tell you who you were, and if possible induce you to claim your heritage.

"I knew then that the John Hertford I had known was not here; I knew then that you reigned in his place, not alone in title and estate, but in the heart of the countess. I saw in it the hand of God working out immutable law; I bowed my head in prayer, praised God in thankfulness — and kept silent. The John Hertford that I had known had been absent many years; in my mind there was no doubt of his death;

children clambered around you and yours; God had directed it all; could I improve upon his design? I have told my story."

Richard Hertford strode across the room to his cousin's side.

"John," he said, extending his hand, "will you forgive me?"

"Hush, Richard," was the instant reply. "You but did your duty, nobly, grandly, firmly. Let us try to forget all that has occurred in this room."

Richard now turned towards the door.

"Stop, Richard," called John. "Where are you going?"

"Back again to the wilderness. It is the only place for me."

"What! Am I not also forgiven?"

"Forgiven? Yes; if there is aught to forgive; but I cannot remain. I must go."

"You must not go. You must remain," interposed the dean. "It is not meet that Mercy should know the secret that is ours. How, then, will your sudden absence be explained, Richard Hertford? Let your forgiveness of others extend to yourself and remain. God requires it as your atonement to Mercy, as your duty to those you love."

"So be it. I will remain."

332 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

He stood silent a moment, and then raising his head, with a smile upon his strong, sad face, he turned again to Ashton and said:

"Jack, will you help me to forget — some things that I have said?"

Then the two men clasped hands again silently. Only their earnest eyes expressed that which clamoured for utterance in the heart of each.

A few moments later, after Ashton had readjusted his collar and resumed his coat, they went out from the rookery together, and the door was closed and locked behind them, upon a room that was to be henceforth doubly sacred to them all.

Half way up the path towards the house they saw, coming towards them, a group which sent a sudden thrill through their hearts.

The countess was approaching them. In her arms she bore little Agnes. Beside her walked Lord Archie Quinlan, and trudging along by his side, clinging to two fingers of his left hand, was the sturdy little figure of the viscount.

"There they are!" exclaimed Archie; and he came forward hastily, and, grasping first one and then another by the hand until he had greeted them all, added:

"Was I not right, Dick? Isn't Jack the same old Jack?"

"Just the same, Archie," was the smiling reply. "He has not changed a bit."

And John Hertford, rightful Earl of Ashton and Cowingford, kissed his children with a new and strange tenderness, and walked beside his wife towards their home, with a new lightness in his step and a perfect peace in his heart.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE AFTERMATH

THERE is in the life of every man a day which may correctly be termed a day of fate. Such a day certainly came into the life of Richard Hertford during the winter which followed the revelations made in the rookery down by the brook.

It happened immediately after the holiday season, and was the result of many talks between him and the earl, for as soon as the strangeness of their relations had worn off, they became inseparable friends and constant companions; but it was the direct consequence of a conversation which followed an announcement made by Richard that he intended to start away again upon one of his endless voyages as soon as the season was sufficiently advanced for him to do so.

Argument against this determination on his part was without avail, and at last, the earl, finding that nothing could shake his cousin's purpose, said:

"Richard, since you are determined to go,

there is one thing which I wish you would do for me — something which I cannot do for myself. Do you think you will understand and appreciate the motive that influences me when I tell you what it is? ”

“ I think so, Jack; what is it? ”

“ I have never known and have never sought to know anything concerning Henry Hollister and his daughter Hope, since that hour in the counting-room of the bank when I believed that I had killed him and had parted from her for ever. I would have news of them. Will you get it for me? ”

Richard did not immediately reply. He remained silent so long that the earl looked upon him in surprise, believing that he might have been misjudged; but he awaited the response to his question without further remark, and at last it came.

“ Tell me just what you wish me to do, ” said Richard.

“ I wish you would go to New York, spend some time there, make the acquaintance of Hope and her father — or rather of Henry Hollister and his daughter, and then write to me about them. You know that my original identity is for ever buried in the grave with my brother in Borneo — that grave which I know it is your intention to

336 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

visit before your next trip is completed. I can never be made known to the Hollisters as the same man who spent his boyhood and young manhood in their home; I must remain dead to them for ever, but I would be less than a man if I did not hope to know something concerning them — did I voluntarily remain in ignorance of everything connected with them.

“I loved Henry Hollister as I would have loved my own father had I ever been permitted to know him; I loved Hope with all the ardour of my youth; I love her now, just as I loved her when I wore knickerbockers and she was in short dresses — as a brother loves a dear sister. I need not assure you that there is not a thought in my soul concerning her which does not purify, augment, and exalt the love that I bear for my wife; I — ”

“Hush, Jack. It is unnecessary for you to say such things.”

“I know that, Dick; but I wish you to understand just why I wish you to do this thing for me.”

“I understand it now, better than you could explain it to me, so there is no need for words.”

“Then you will do what I ask? ”

“Certainly. I had not thought of refusing.”

“That is like your generous heart, Dick. You know that Henry Hollister and my father were

classmates at Oxford, and that the kind old banker remembered his friend sufficiently well to bestow his name upon the foundling discovered upon his doorstep, little dreaming that he was naming the child for its father. I know Henry Hollister's hospitable ways. You will be invited to his home. You will meet Hope; doubtless she is married ere this; but if you do not meet her you will hear of her, and when I know that she is happy and contented, I shall feel that the last shadow has departed from my life. Will you do all this? "

" Yes."

" Thank you, Richard. There is only one reservation I would make in what you are to do. I would request that there be no mention of the name of John Ashton, unless, indeed, you feel that you are empowered to convince them in some way that he is dead."

Shortly after the New Year, Richard Hertford sailed for New York. He arrived in the morning and that same afternoon called upon the banker, who was still vigorous and full of that unyielding energy which had made him a successful business man; and when Henry Hollister learned the name of his caller, and knew who he was, the Englishman found awaiting him a welcome such as he had never received before.

338 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

The banker made him his guest on the spot, sweeping away every objection which Hartford could offer, in the blunt, hearty way which afforded no opportunity for argument. His baggage was reclaimed from the hotel where it had been sent, and before sundown he was standing in the drawing-room of the Hollister mansion, with the right hand of Hope Hollister clasped in his own.

He uttered some commonplace phrases about being happy to make her acquaintance, vaguely conscious of the fact that his utterances were mere platitudes, and that he was experiencing a thrill such as he had never known before, not even when he parted from Mercy Covington for the last time before he went away into the wilderness in order that his cousin Jack might win her. That is how it happened to be his day of fate—and hers.

He had intended to remain a week at the most in New York; but the week lengthened into a month, and the month into two more, before he decided that he must go; and then he went to Henry Hollister and told him that he had decided to take a companion with him in the future, and that his daughter Hope had consented, subject to his approval, to accompany him.

During his stay at the home of the Hollisters

he sent frequent letters to the earl, and an extract from one of them, written on the eve of his departure from America, speaks for itself:

"We are to be married to-morrow morning at ten. The wedding will be a quiet one at the house; we both preferred it so, and at noon we sail for Gibraltar. Within a few months — I cannot now fix the time — we will arrive in England, and with your permission, I shall bring Hope straight to the Hall; and I shall take the liberty of advising her father of the time of our arrival and inviting him to meet us there. Hope has related to me the story of John Ashton so far as it concerned her. She loved him very dearly and she loves his memory now, for she is convinced that he is dead. Her father has never mentioned the name to me, and of course never will do so. It is a strange destiny, Jack, that has come to you and to me, for we each have for our wife a woman who was once beloved by the other. . . . All this will do away with the last shadow that shrouded your life, but there is one that hangs over me still, and I shall not die until it is dispelled. I refer to the mystery which surrounds the fate of your brother. It is a task that I have given myself, to discover who and what it was that called him out that night, and

340 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

what it was that injured him so that he wandered away an imbecile, ultimately to die in that blistering Bornean hell; and yet I cannot help doubting that I will ever know more than I know now — which is nothing. Had his life been less perfect than it was, had his character not always been above and beyond reproach, I should adhere to my original idea that it was the result of the jealousy of a woman. I know that I have your blessing in this new happiness that has come to me, and Dean Douglass would assure me that the hand of God has directed it all; if that is true, then I thank God with all my heart.

“ I have neglected to tell you that I have seen a photograph of John Ashton, taken about a month before he left New York, and I must confess that Hope was correct when she informed me that he might have been my own brother some years younger. Ashton wore his beard as I do mine, and there certainly is a strong resemblance. If you should raise a beard I think we would resemble each other.”

And so it came to pass that when another Christmas tide arrived, Hertford Hall became the centre of a strangely reunited group, for gathered around the Yule log that burned and glowed in the great fireplace were the principal characters

of this strange history, and in the background, constantly watchful for the comfort of everybody save himself, was Robert, hale, hearty, complacently content.

There had been nothing remarkable about the meeting between Hope Hertford and the earl. If vaguely he reminded her of one who was dead, she made no comment, nor gave the matter more than a reflective thought; it was an experience sufficiently common to see in one person characteristics or features which bring to mind memories of another. The earl made no sign that he had ever seen her before; still, there was an added gladness in his heart when he encountered her and knew beyond a doubt that she had found supreme happiness in her union with Richard Hertford.

Mercy referred to the subject once, and then dismissed it for ever.

"Is this the Hope Hollister that you knew, or thought you knew, during the years of forgetfulness?" she asked her husband; and he answered:

"Yes; she is the same, but she does not recognize me."

Two years later, also at Christmas tide, the same party was again gathered at the Hall, and

342 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

with them a number of invited guests from the country round. The great ballroom of the Hall had been thrown open; a roaring fire gleamed in the massive chimney; children romped upon the floor; a decorated tree glistened and groaned beneath its weight of presents; the guests were gathered in groups watching the children at their sports, and the atmosphere was filled with joy and enchantment, when old Robert made his appearance and approached his master.

Half way across the room he paused, hesitated a moment, and then, retracing his steps, went to Richard Hertford and whispered something in his ear.

Hertford started perceptibly, hesitated an instant, and then followed Robert from the room.

Neither spoke until they were in a remote part of the house, and then Robert paused.

"Can it be the same, Mr. Richard?" he asked anxiously.

"Without doubt. Where is he?" was the instant reply.

"It was a man before; it is a woman this time, sir," said Robert.

"Was the message given in just the same manner?"

"Yes, sir; precisely. She said: 'Tell him that his friend Tom wishes to see him; he will

understand.' I nearly fainted with fright, sir, and I thought it best to go to you instead of taking the message to his lordship."

"Quite right, Robert; quite right. It is much better that I should see this person. You say that it is a woman?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where is she?"

"At the east door. Shall I accompany you, sir?"

"No; I will go alone."

"You will be cautious, sir? Do not, I pray you, forget what happened to his lordship when, on the evening of his wedding reception, he was summoned from us in the same manner."

"I will not forget. Wait here for me, Robert."

The old man bowed, and Richard Hertford turned and went out alone into the night, his heart beating strangely, for he felt that the mystery which had seemed to be beyond solution was about to be explained at last.

Before he opened the door he remained a moment in the darkened hallway, the better to accustom his eyes to the gloom without, for he did not know what he had to face; then he opened the door suddenly and stepped outside, closing it behind him.

There was a figure there confronting him — the

344 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

figure of a woman; but when he appeared she started back with a low cry, and he, without hesitation, sprang forward and seized the woman by the wrist, for she had raised one arm and he saw that something gleamed in her grasp.

"Who are you and what do you want?" he demanded coldly, speaking in a tone that might not have been overheard a dozen feet away.

"You are not John Hertford!" she cried hoarsely. "Why did not he come? I did not send for you. You are Richard Hertford, not John. Where is John? Why did he not come when I sent for him? He promised that he would always obey when I sent for him, and he did so once; but not this time—not this time. Go back and send him to me."

Instantly Richard realized that he had to deal with one who had lost her reason, and, always quick to think and to act, he replied calmly:

"He is ill. He must see you inside. Come."

He drew her towards the door, opened it and gently forced her to follow him into the house, where, still exerting persuasive force, he conducted her to a deserted room, calling to Robert as he went.

"Stand here near the door," he said to the old servant, "and permit nobody to enter. I will summon you if it is necessary."

"Where is John Hertford?" demanded the woman when they were alone in the room with the door closed. "You said that he would see me here. Is he not coming?"

"Presently. You will have to talk with me first. This is not the first time you have called upon him and sent the same message, is it? Do you remember the other time?"

"Yes; it was long, very long ago — the night after the wedding. Oh, yes; I remember. It was in London. I stood outside and looked through the windows so long that I got very tired. Then a man came along and I made him deliver the message for me — and presently John Hertford came out."

"What did you do then? You tried to kill him, did you not?"

"Yes," she replied simply, as though the confession were a perfectly natural one. "I tried to kill him but I did not succeed. I would not have done it if he had not told me that I must go back to the place that I hate. It was then, while he was holding me by the arm, and trying to call a policeman, that I struck him. I am sorry that I did not kill him, but I shall do it to-night if you will send him to me."

"Presently; you must tell me all about it first. Who are you and why do you wish to kill

346 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

Lord Ashton? Perhaps if you will tell me all about it I can help you."

"I am Janet Fairfax," replied the woman. "Did you never hear of Janet Fairfax? I should have been John Hertford's mother if God had been just and John Hertford's father, the earl, had been true. He made me love him and then he went away and married another woman, and I swore, and my brother, the doctor, also swore, that their children should perish. Then, after that, they came and shut me up in a terrible place where there are a lot of people who are mad, and I have lived there ever since, except when I got away from them that other time and now. It was my brother who shut me up, not the earl. He was kind and good to me except that he made me love him and then went away; but he was never as bad as my brother, the doctor, thought he was. That was my fault, for I told my brother a lie, and led him to believe many things that were not true. Are you going to bring John Hertford to me?"

"Presently. What is that thing in your hand?"

"A knife. I found it in the street before I left London. Do you think that I can kill him with that?"

"Perhaps. Let me see it."

She gave it to him obediently and he dropped it into one of his pockets.

"What did you strike him with that other time?" Hertford asked, still speaking calmly.

"It was a piece of a garden rake that I stole from the grounds of the house where they keep me a prisoner. Will you give me back the knife now?"

"In a moment." Then, raising his voice, he called Robert.

"Ask Dean Douglass to come here," he said when Robert entered the room. "Do it quietly so that no one may be alarmed."

The sound of that name produced a strange effect upon the woman, for she sank back upon a chair, moaning, "Not he! Not he!" The shawl which had hitherto covered her head dropped aside, disclosing a profusion of hair as white as the snow on the ground outside, and a face that was still strangely beautiful, with scarcely a wrinkle to proclaim the number of years that she had lived.

She sobbed on and on, quietly, until the dean entered the room, when, with a wild cry, she sprang to her feet and started towards the door.

"Janet Fairfax!" exclaimed the dean — "I thought you were dead."

She turned then, with all the fierceness of a

348 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

tigress, and leaped at his throat, but the strong arms of Richard Hertford seized her and held her motionless; and while they stood thus there came a summons at the same outer door through which she had entered the house, and when Robert opened it, he was confronted by two men who abruptly announced that they were in search of an escaped lunatic, whom they had tracked to that door.

She was delivered over to them and taken away, and then Richard drew the dean again into the deserted room.

"Tell me all that you know," he said.

"The woman is Janet Fairfax, the sister of the doctor who stole the child. I have always been led to believe that she was dead, but it seems I was mistaken. How did she come here?"

Richard related all that had taken place, and then the dean added:

"I do not believe my friend ever really wronged this woman. She was a flighty girl and very beautiful. The former earl certainly paid her a great deal of attention, and when she found that it was mere pastime on his part and that he had married another, she made charges which he always assured me were untrue — and I believed him. I believe him still. It is our duty, however, henceforth to see to it that she is well cared for,

and that she never has another opportunity to fly from her keepers. It was a narrow escape, Richard. If Jack had gone to the door she would have struck him with the knife."

"Yes; I am glad that Robert had the wisdom to come to me with the message. But the great mystery is solved. We know now what happened to my cousin. But who is, or was, the man Tom to whom that mysterious message referred?"

"Ah! I had forgotten. When Janet Fairfax was a child her father and brother nicknamed her 'Tommy.' The name clung to her, and by her intimates she was frequently called Tom. Without doubt, our lost John knew about that past, and did understand that the friend Tom was no other than Janet Fairfax."

Within the ancient mausoleum which adjoins the chapel of Hertford Hall there is a sealed tomb which bears the following inscription:

SACRED TO THE MEMORY
OF ONE WHO WAS
LOVED AND LOST.

Richard Hertford has explained its presence there by the statement that encased therein are the remains of one who was his companion during

350 A GENTLEMAN OF QUALITY

that terrible time in Borneo, when they were both slaves to a horde of savages. Before the end of the first year of his married life he went again to that inhospitable country, accompanied by a strong guard, found the grave of the lost earl, and conveyed the remains to England; so that, after all, the victim of the sins of his father rested beside him in the family tomb at Hertford Hall.

Later, when a son was born to Richard and Hope, it received the name of Hollister, so that Herndon and Hollister Hertford grew to manhood side by side, as Richard and John had done before them.

THE END.

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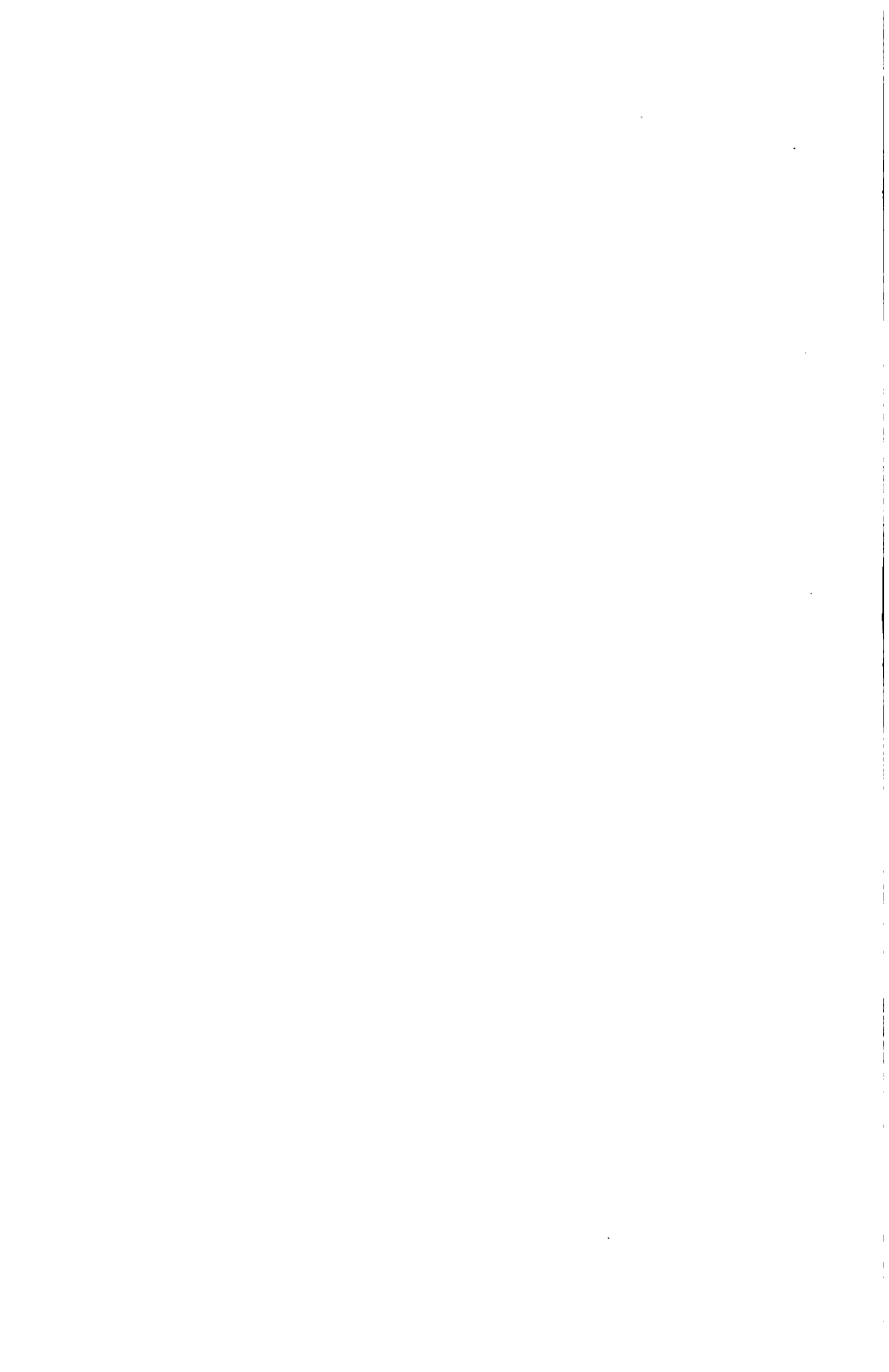
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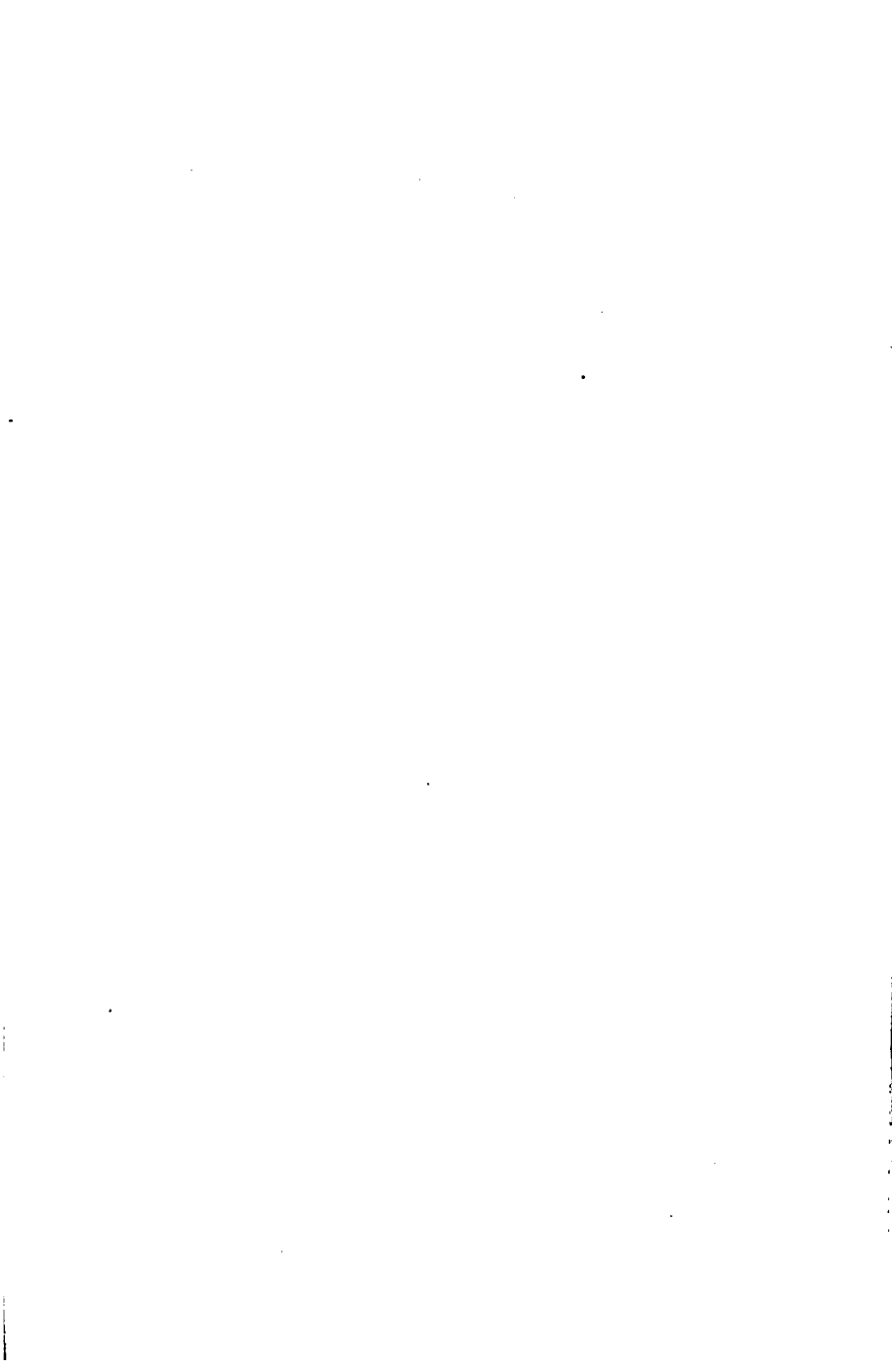
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